WEST VIEW OF CAPITOL.

West Front, 1900.

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HISTORY

OF THE

UNITED STATES CAPITOL

BY

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We have built no temple but the Capitol;
We consult no common oracle but the Constitution
—RUFUS CHOATE

Chapter XI

The Competition for the Extension of the Capitol

THE growth of the United States and the consequent increase in the membership of Congress, as well as the number of visitors to the Capitol, found the building inadequate for its purposes twenty years after it was completed. On May 28, 1850, the Committee on Public Buildings recommended an extension of the Capitol, in accordance with a report and drawings made by Robert Mills, who was at the time the Architect of Public Buildings.[1] Mills, in his description of the proposed extension by wings, states that each wing was planned to be 100 feet north and south by 200 feet east and west, forming projections 60 feet east and west from the line of the old building, divided or separated from the present building by a spacious court, so that the usefulness of the rooms of the old building would not be injured by the annexation of the wings. The space allotted in each wing for the two halls was in the center or on the axis of the old Capitol. The Senate Chamber was to accommodate one hundred Senators, and was to be nearly semicircular in form, with a semidomical ceiling flatter than the one used in the old Chamber. It was to be 90 feet wide by 60 feet deep, and with windows located on its north and south sides. The President's chair was to be located on the north, so that the members would face a northern light. In the rear of the President's chair an entrance was arranged for a portico with ten columns, forming the principal feature on the northern façade. On the east and west of the Chamber were grand stairways, together with sixteen rooms for the officers of the Senate. Below were twenty-eight committee rooms. The Senate wing was designed to have four entrances—a central entrance on the axis of the Capitol, with a corridor leading through the Rotunda from wing to wing; an eastern entrance through a colonnade on the eastern front, this colonnade to extend from wing to wing 360 feet long, with an entrance from each of the grand stairways on the east and west [Plate 137]. The south or House wing was arranged on a plan similar to the Senate wing, giving a larger audience chamber, while a House Library was to be obtained from the square spaces of the old Hall of Representatives. The Congressional Library was to have been enlarged so as to occupy the whole of the western projection of the old building. The old Hall of Representatives was to have been turned into an audience room, where works of art could be displayed with advantage. The old Senate Chamber was to be made into a Supreme Court room, while it was proposed to change the old Supreme Court into the Law Library. With this report Robert Mills presented drawings showing plans, sections, and elevations. I have been able to find only a section and an elevation of these drawings [Plates 138 and 139], although diligent search has been made through the Departments and among the descendants of the Architect for the missing drawings.[2]

[1] *Congressional Globe* (31–2), vol. 21, pt. 2, 1081. Mills identified himself as "Architect of Public Buildings" but did not hold the title officially. By 1850, he had been the architect or superintendent of many important public buildings in Washington, including the Treasury Department (1836–42), the Patent Office (1836–40), the Post Office (1839–42), and the Washington Monument (1848–1884). See John M. Bryan, ed., *Robert Mills* (Washington: American Institute of Architects, 1989).

[2] *Enlargement of the Capitol,* S. report 145 (31–1), Serial 565. The section and elevation drawings (Plates 138 and 139) of Mills's proposed 1850 design, submitted with his May report, are located in the Architect of the Capitol collection. In February, Mills addressed a memorial to both houses of Congress presenting drawings and a model of a proposed Capitol extension. These drawings and the model have been lost. See Pamela Scott, "Robert Mills: Unofficial Architect Designs Capitol Improvements and Extensions," *Capitol Dome* 24 (November 1989): 7–8.

In the description Mills says the different details of the architecture of the old building are carried out around the wings, with porticoes located on the north and south.

This scheme proposed a central dome similar in character to that of St. Peter's in Rome, St. Paul's in London, or the Invalides in Paris, in which the colonnade was to extend around and rest upon the base of the Dome of the old Capitol.

The Senate did not approve the report of the Committee on Public Buildings, and on September 26, 1850, passed the following resolution:

"*Resolved,* That the Committee on Public Buildings be authorized to invite plans, accompanied by estimates, for the extension of the Capitol, and to allow a premium of $500 for the plan which may be adopted by the Committees on Public Buildings (acting jointly) of the two Houses of Congress, to be paid out of the contingent fund of the Senate." [3]

The following general invitation was published in the National Intelligencer, of Washington, daily from September 30 to October 21, 1850:

"ENLARGEMENT OF THE CAPITOL.

"The Committee on Public Buildings of the Senate, having been authorized by a resolution of that body 'to invite plans, accompanied by estimates, for the extension of the Capitol, and to allow a premium of $500 for the plan which may be adopted by the Committees on Public Buildings (acting jointly) of the two Houses of Congress,' accordingly invite such plans and estimates, to be delivered to the Secretary of the Senate on or before the 1st day of December next.

"It is required that these plans and estimates shall provide for the extension of the Capitol, either by additional wings, to be placed on the north and south of the present building, or by the erection of a separate and distinct building within the inclosure to the east of the building.

"The committee do not desire to prescribe any conditions that may restrain the free exercise of architectural taste and judgment, but they would prefer that whatever plan may be proposed may have such reference to and correspondence with the present building as to preserve the general symmetry of the entire structure when complete. Although but one plan can be adopted, the committee reserve to themselves the right to form such plan by the adoption of parts of different plans submitted, *should such a course be found necessary,* in which event the committee also reserve to themselves the right to divide or proportion, according to their own judgment, the amount of premium to be awarded for the whole plan to those whose plans may in part be adopted, according to the relative importance and merit of each part adopted.

"R. M. T. Hunter,
"Jefferson Davis,
"John H. Clarke,
"*Committee of Senate on Public Buildings.*

"SENATE CHAMBER, *30 September, 1850.*

"N. B.—The several daily papers published at Washington will please insert the above daily for two weeks, and send their accounts to the Secretary of the Senate." [4]

The plans of the various competitors were examined by the committee, and they determined not to adopt any design as a whole, but selected the four sets which they considered the most meritorious, and

[3] *Congressional Globe* (31–1), vol. 21, pt. 2, 1081. Brown misdated the resolution, which was passed on September 25. See also "An Act Making Appropriations for the Civil and Diplomatic Expenses of the Government in the Year Ending the 30th of June, 1851, and for other Purposes," in *United States Statutes at Large,* vol. 9, 538.

[4] For an example of the general invitation, see *Daily National Intelligencer* [Washington, D.C.], October 11, 1850.

divided the premium of $500 between the four competitors.[5] Jefferson Davis submitted the report of the Committee on Public Buildings to the Senate February 8, 1851. This committee appears to have been careful and conscientious in the execution of their duties, as they say: "To answer the requirements of Congress without impairing the beauty or disturbing the harmony or diminishing the effect of the noble structure our fathers erected was a problem of extreme perplexity. It will be readily perceived that there must be greater difficulty in devising a plan for the enlargement of a building to which additions were not originally contemplated than in deciding upon one for an entirely new edifice."[6] Although I have been able to discover only the plans of a competitor who failed to put his name on the drawings [Plates 141 to 144] and two schemes by Thomas U. Walter, one a competitive plan and the other a modification of the same scheme [Plates 145 to 148], the wording of different reports gives a clear idea of the general arrangements which were under contemplation. The first was an extension of the building north and south, simply increasing the length. The second was a duplication of the old building, placing the new structure on the east. A third contemplated wings whose east and west axis was at right angles and whose north and south axis was coincident with that of the old building. A fourth contemplated wings extending much farther to the east than to the west of the old building [Plates 141 to 144].[7]

After mature deliberation, Robert Mills was instructed to draw a plan combining features from various sources, particularly utilizing the four sets of drawings which had been submitted in the competition. They recommended the addition of wings to the north and south ends of the old structure, the east and west axis of which were at right angles to the north and south axis of the old Capitol. The west front of the wings was to be placed on a line back of the west front of the building, and their east front was to extend far beyond the east front of the portion already built. While the drawings [Plates 141 to 144] show the general plan approved by the committee, discrepancies show that it is one of the original competitive plans, and the similarity is due to the fact that the general features were adopted by the committee. In the plan approved it was proposed to devote the whole of the west front to the Library, and special accommodations for the Supreme Court were arranged in the basement of the north wing. The committee state that "The exterior of the present [old] Capitol was changed from the original design by increasing the height of the principal Dome and adding two of a smaller size. It is proposed in the alterations to restore, as far as may be, the classic beauty and simplicity of the first plan by reducing the size of the principal Dome and removing the others, and to break the long horizontal line of the roof by an elevation over each wing through which the Chamber of the Senate and the Hall of Representatives may be lighted. The small domes [at present on old wings] may be replaced by any of the various methods of lighting from the roof without raising a prominent object above the building."[8]

Among the drawings of Thomas U. Walter I find a perspective made by the Corps of Topographical Engineers after this competition was closed [Plate 140].[9]

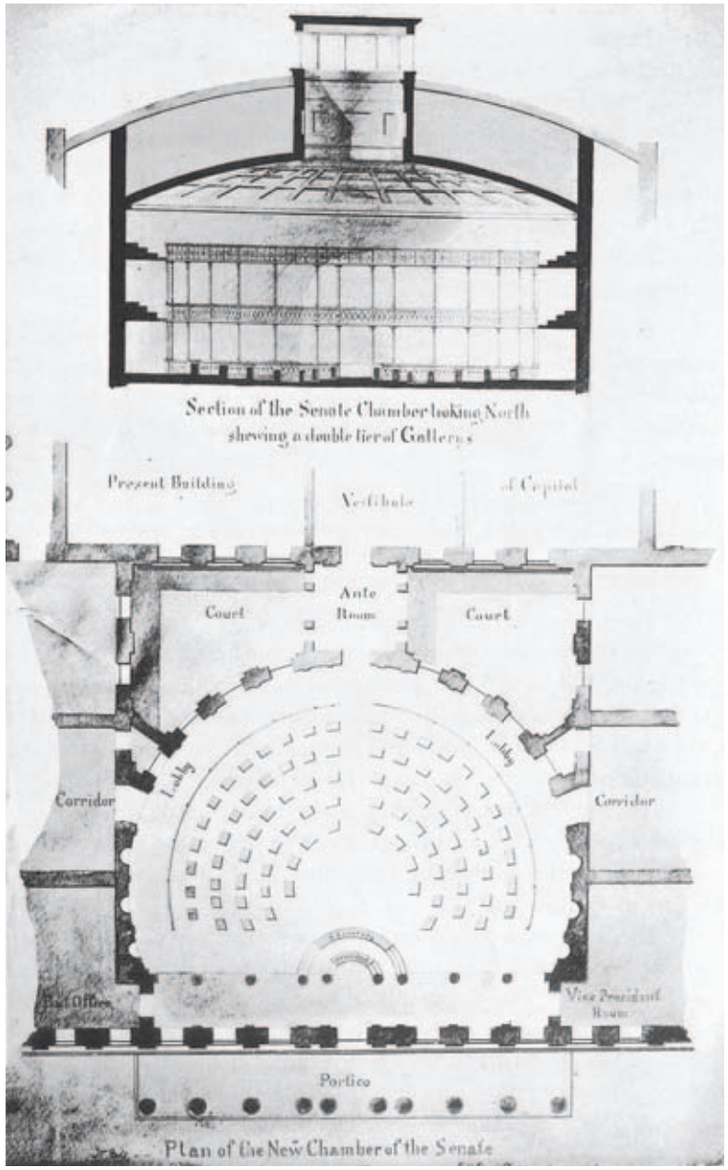
[5] Five competitors actually shared the premium, including William P. Elliot, Philip Harry, Robert Mills, Charles F. Anderson, and F. McClelland. See William C. Allen, *The Dome of the United States Capitol: An Architectural History* (Washington: Government Printing Office, 1992), 7.

[6] "Report on the Enlargement of the Capitol Building," in *Congressional Globe* (31–2), vol. 23, 475.

[7] Plates 141 to 144 were the composite drawings prepared by Robert Mills in 1851 combining the best features of the competition submittals. These drawings are located in the Architect of the Capitol collection.

[8] "Report on the Enlargement of the Capitol Building," 475.

[9] Philip Harry, not Walter, drew this perspective of the proposed Capitol extension (Plate 140). The drawing actually captured second place in the competition. See RG 40, Subject Files, Curator's Office, AOC.



PLAN NEW SENATE CHAMBER, BY ROBERT MILLS, ARCHITECT.

Section and plan of a proposed Senate Chamber, February 1850. *Location unknown.*

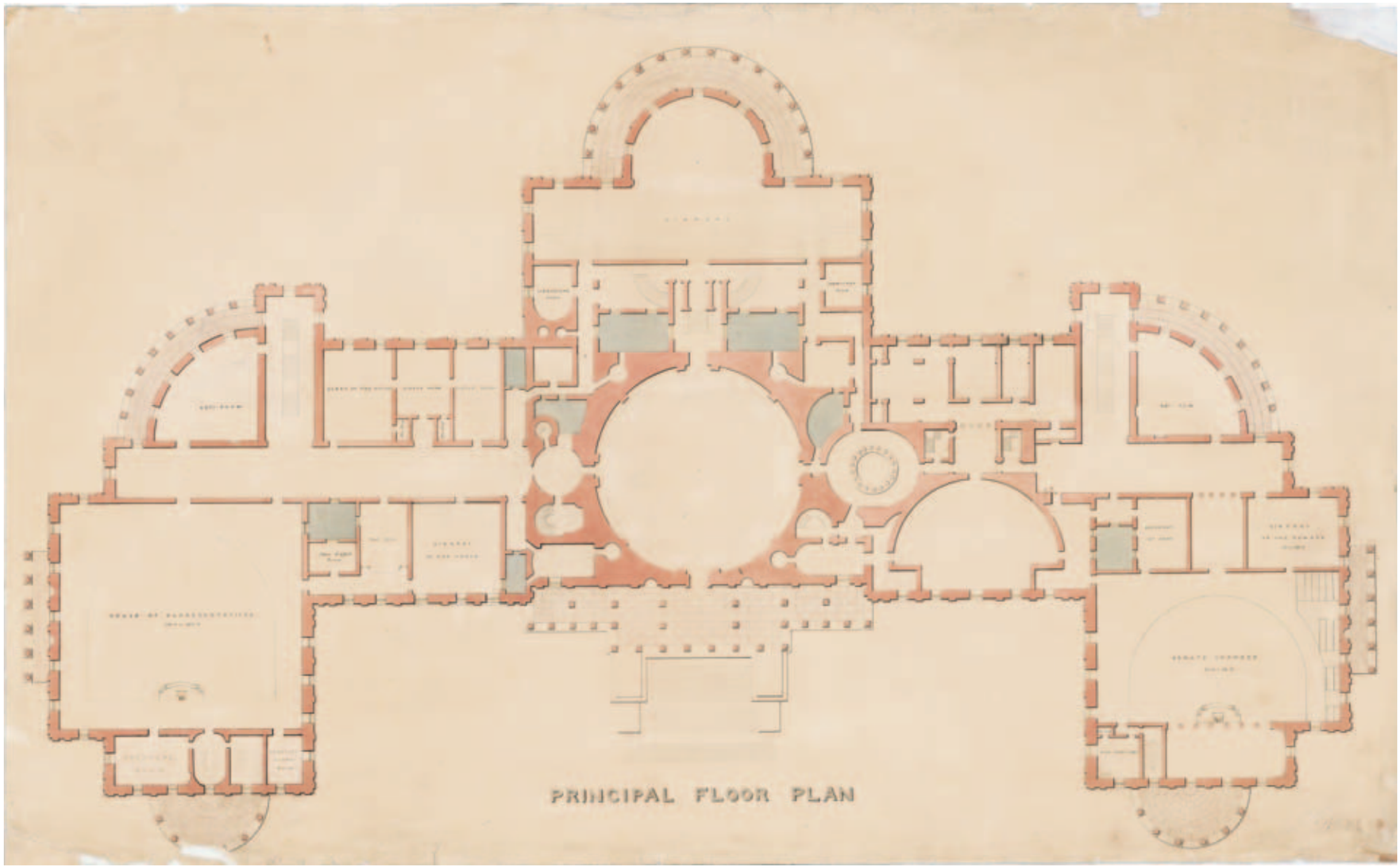
SECTION OF DESIGN BY ROBERT MILLS.

Longitudinal section of a proposed extension of the Capitol (facade no. 3), February 1850. Drawn by W. A. Powell. A figure of "Liberty" would have crowned Mills's dome.

NORTH OR SOUTH ELEVATION, DESIGN BY ROBERT MILLS.

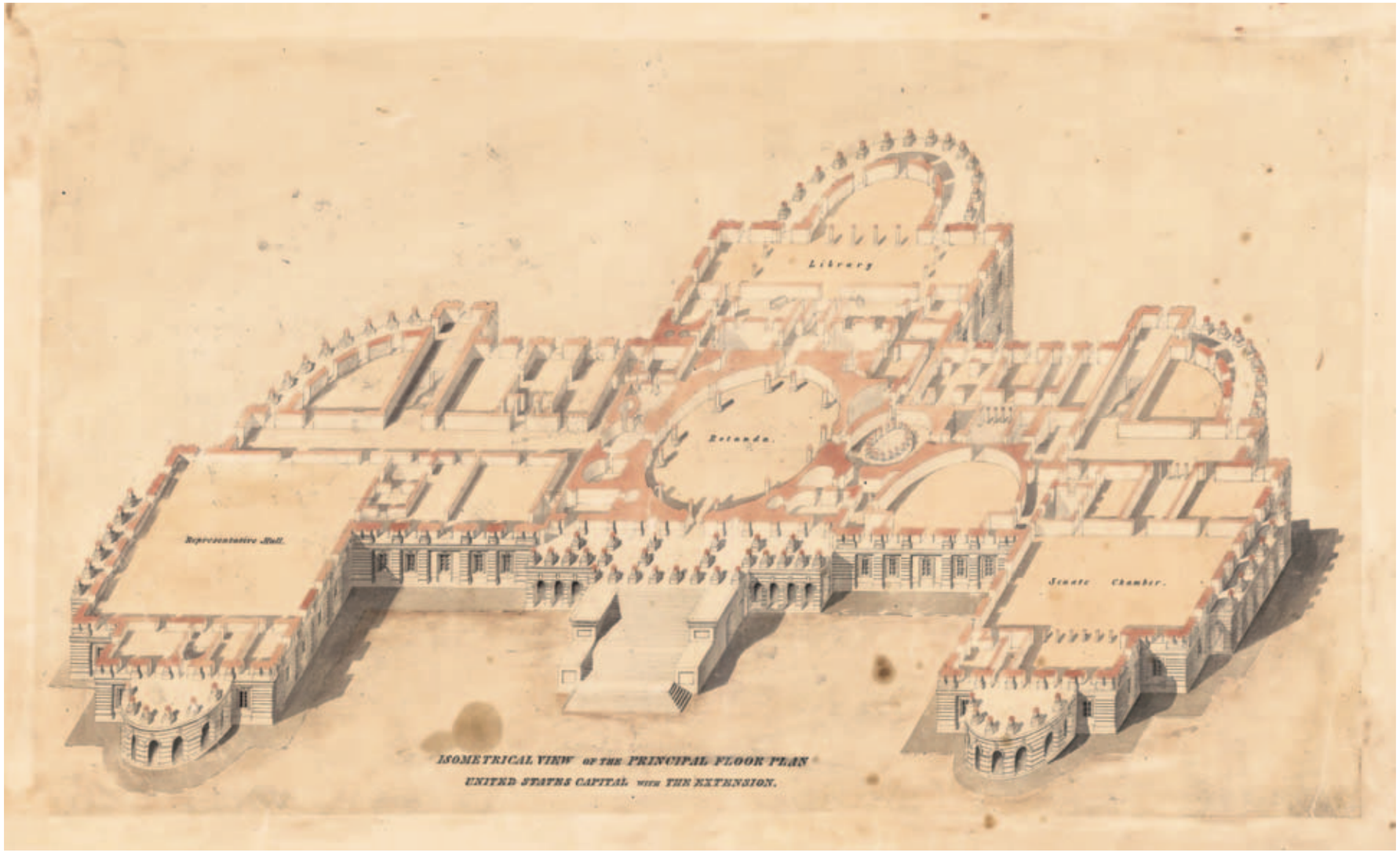
End elevation of a proposed extension of the Capitol (facade no. 3), February 1850. Drawn by W. A. Powell.

PERSPECTIVE FOR CAPITOL EXTENSION, BY BUREAU OF TOPOGRAPHICAL ENGINEERS.
Drawn by Philip Harry, December 1850. Harry placed second in the competition of 1850.



COMPETITIVE PLAN, AUTHOR UNIDENTIFIED

Principal floor plan of the Capitol by Robert Mills, 1851.



COMPETITIVE PLAN.

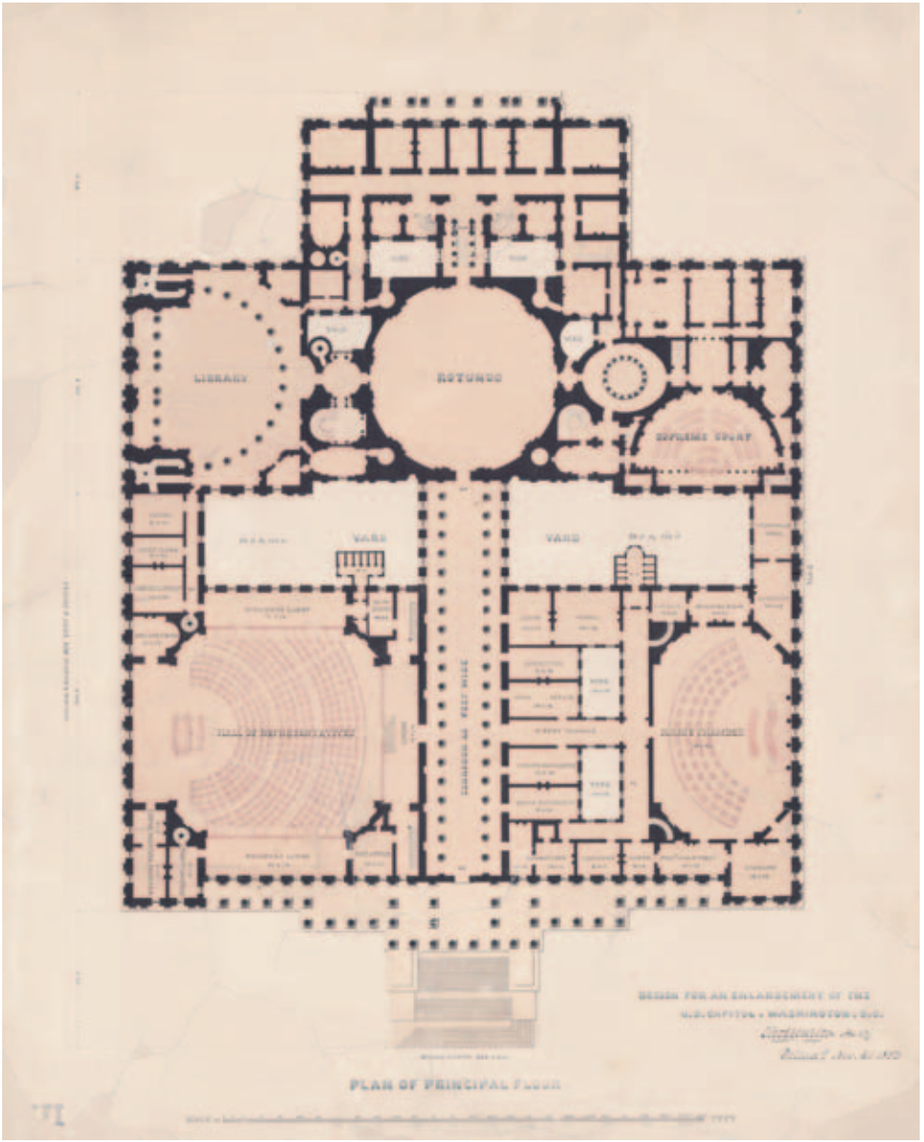
Isometric view of the principal floor plan (related drawing, plate 141) by Robert Mills, 1851.

COMPETITIVE PLAN, WEST ELEVATION.

West front elevation for a Capitol extension by Robert Mills, 1851 (related plans, plates 141 and 142).

COMPETITIVE PLAN, EAST ELEVATION.

East front elevation for a Capitol extension by Robert Mills, 1851 (related drawings, plates 141, 142, and 143).

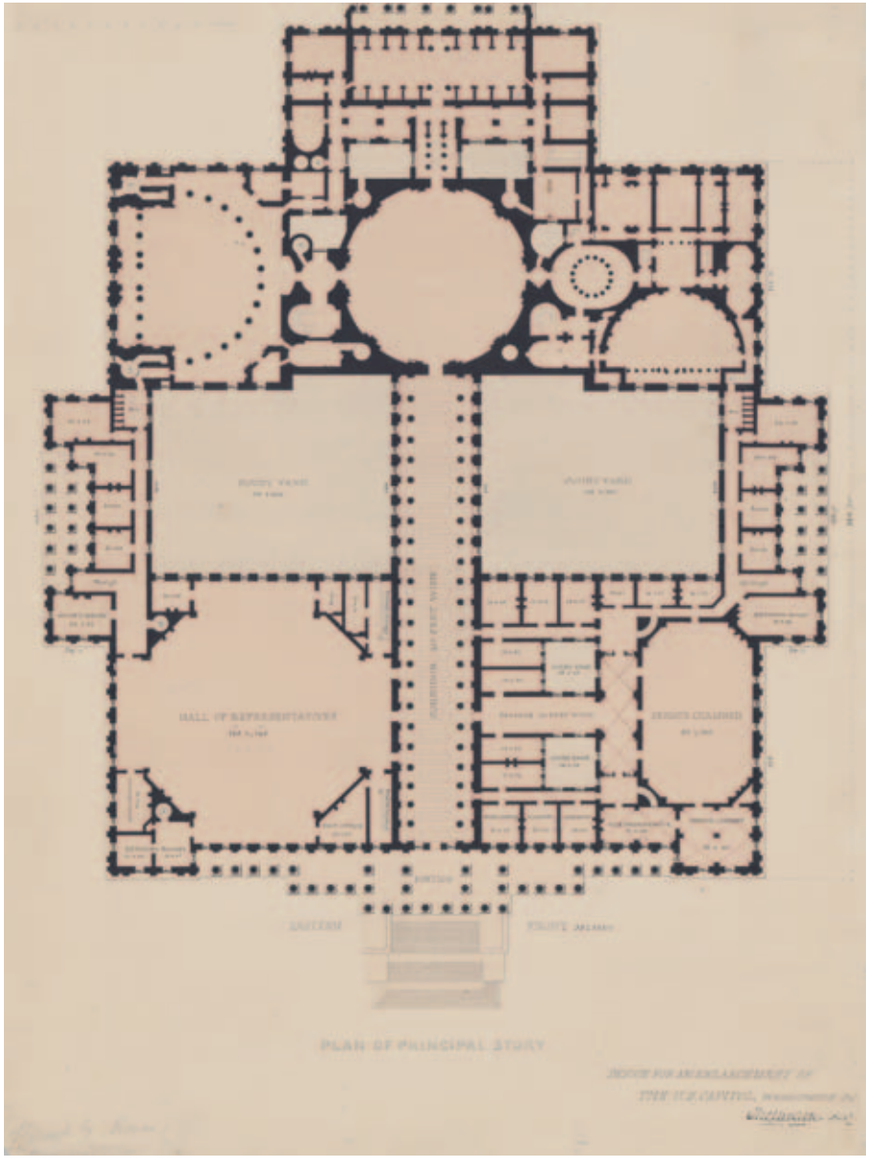


COMPETITIVE PLAN OF T. U. WALTER FOR CAPITOL EXTENSION 1850.

Floor plan for a proposed Capitol extension by Thomas Ustick Walter, November 1850. This plan was drawn to illustrate an extension of the east front, the approach favored by the House of Representatives.

PERSPECTIVE VIEW COMPETITIVE DESIGN,—T. U. WALTER, ARCHITECT.

Perspective view from the northeast of a proposed extension of the Capitol by means of a large addition to the east front, November 1850.



MODIFICATION WALTERS' COMPETITIVE PLAN.

Plan of the principal floor for a proposed extension of the Capitol by Thomas Ustick Walter, 1851. The plan shows a huge addition to the east front with a monumental central corridor lined by columns and flanked by large open courtyards to link the old and new sections of the building.

PERSPECTIVE OF COMPETITIVE PLAN,—WALTER ARCHITECT.

Southeast perspective view of an 1851 revision of Walter's competition plan for a proposed extension of the Capitol (related plan, plate 147).