

HISTORY OF THE UNITED STATES

CAPITOL

*“We have built no national temples but the Capitol;
we consult no common oracle but the Constitution.”*

Representative Rufus Choate, 1833



GRANDEUR ON THE POTOMAC

*F*rom a two-hundred-year perspective, it is not easy to grasp the difficulties surrounding the location, design, and construction of the United States Capitol. When work began in the 1790s, the enterprise had more enemies than friends. Citizens of New York, Philadelphia, and Baltimore did not want the nation's capital sited on the Potomac River. The Capitol's beginnings were stymied by its size, scale, and lack of precedent. In the beginning Congress did not provide funds to build it. Regional jealousy, political intrigue, and a general lack of architectural sophistication retarded the work. The resources of the remote neighborhood were not particularly favorable, offering little in the way of manpower or raw materials to help build this ambitious structure, and doubters were everywhere, questioning the wisdom of putting such a building in such a place. Yet, despite the obstacles, the Capitol slowly evolved into a monument of classical grandeur that commands admiration and respect. Today it is one of the most famous structures in the world, not only one of America's great architectural achievements but also an international symbol of democracy and self-government.

Long before the first stone was set, the story of the Capitol was intertwined with the effort to establish the seat of federal government. The Revolution that won the right of self-government for thirteen independent states started a controversy over the location of the new nation's capital, a fight some historians consider the last battle of the war.¹ At the close of military hostilities with Great Britain in 1781, the United States was a nation loosely bound under the Articles of Confederation, a weak form of government with no executive, no judiciary, and a virtually powerless Congress. Although the subject of the country's permanent capital was discussed during this period, legislators could not agree on an issue so taut with regional tension. In 1783 Thomas Jefferson, then a representative in Congress, wrote the governor of Virginia about possible locations for a new capital and noted that sites on the Hudson, Delaware, and Potomac rivers were being considered. The Hudson location had little support, while the Delaware River site had seven votes. Southern states liked the idea of two capitals, one on the Potomac at Georgetown, Maryland, and one farther north. Without nine states agreeing, however, the location of the nation's capital remained unsettled.²

In 1787 a convention was called to devise ways to improve the Articles of Confederation, but delegates soon realized that a totally new constitution was needed to bind the states into "a more perfect union." During four months in Philadelphia, they

View of the Potomac and the City of Washington (Detail)

Engraving of a painting by George Beck, ca. 1796

Kiplinger Washington Collection



View of the Federal Edifice in New York

by Amos Doolittle, 1789

Library of Congress

Citizens of New York raised money to transform their old city hall into the nation's capitol, hoping Congress would extend its stay in the city indefinitely. Pierre L'Enfant designed the alterations, including a Doric portico with thirteen stars in the entablature and an eagle in the pediment. Plaques carved with laurel wreaths and thirteen arrows were placed above the upper windows. Inside he created an American order with stars and the rays of the sun illuminating the national monogram that was integrated into column capitals.

Despite New York's hospitality, Congress spent only two sessions in Federal Hall. After the Residence Act passed in 1790, the federal government left for Philadelphia, awaiting a new capital city being prepared on the Potomac.

devised a framework of federal government that has endured to this day. They dealt quickly with the issue of a capital city: in article one, section eight, the Framers granted Congress the right to accept a donation of land "not exceeding ten Miles square" over which it would "exercise exclusive Legislation in all cases whatsoever." Congress was given the

authority to supply the district with "needful" (i.e., necessary) buildings in which to conduct business. Thus, the capital city of Washington and the Capitol of the United States were authorized in the country's Constitution. The delegates, however, had left the details to be ironed out in the future, and deciding where to establish the seat of government and what to build as a capitol proved to be far more difficult and quarrelsome tasks.

The first session of the first Congress began in New York City on March 4, 1789, but a quorum in the House of Representatives and Senate was not present until a month later. Once there were enough members present to conduct business, Congress began to set the machinery of government into motion, establishing the first cabinet departments, creating the first judicial system, prescribing oaths of office, and proposing the first amendments to the Constitution, which became the Bill of Rights. Amid this important work the issue of creating a seat of government was discussed, but nothing conclusive happened. A movement by northern interests to locate the capital on the Susquehanna River was thwarted by Virginia Congressman James Madison, and the subject was deferred until the second session. As time passed, however, interest in a capital city grew as people realized the riches and prestige that were at stake. Such a place would have vast commercial possibilities, and real estate values would surely soar. Also, as today, state pride and local loyalties were potent forces and figured into the contest. Unlike legislation that applied to the country evenly, selecting the site of the nation's capital would result in one big winner and at least a couple sore losers.

One of the best records of the discussion regarding the seat of government is found in the diary of William Maclay, a senator from Pennsylvania who spiced his observations with humor and skepticism. Maclay wrote of the rancor surrounding the dual question of establishing both a permanent federal capital and a temporary capital where Congress would meet while the permanent one was under construction. On June 8, 1790, Maclay described the reaction of two South Carolina senators, Ralph Izard and Pierce Butler, when Philadelphia was being considered as a location for the nation's permanent capital:

How shall I describe this day of confusion In the Senate? Mr. Lee laid on the table a Report

of some additional Rules, relative to the intercourse between the Two houses, after this he moved that the bill for the permanent Residence of Congress should be postponed to take up Resolution of the Representatives for adjourning to Philada. now it was Izard flamed and Butler bounced & both seemed to rage with madness.³

To defeat Philadelphia, Izard and Butler went to the lodgings of Samuel Johnston, a sickly senator from North Carolina, and brought him into the chamber in a sedan chair. (He was still wearing a night cap.) A sickbed was set up in an adjoining committee room. A second ailing senator, William Few of Georgia, came to the chamber unassisted. With these reinforcements, Izard and Butler defeated Philadelphia by two votes while the Senate roared with so much noise that Maclay thought it sounded like a fish market.

Maclay's diary is full of similar accounts, of more speeches, of maneuvering by northern and southern factions, and of coalitions that were formed and dissolved almost daily. No site below the Potomac nor above New York was considered, but many in between were. President George Washington pushed steadily for the Potomac. During the Revolution he conceived the idea of locating the country's capital along the Potomac and as president he used his influence to promote the river's commercial and political future. Southerners pointed to one of its more obvious advantages: a capital on the Potomac would be near the geographic center of the country. Philadelphia, then America's largest city, had the powerful Pennsylvania delegation behind it but was regarded with suspicion by members from southern, slave-holding states. New York City was the natural favorite of New England states. Opposition from both the Philadelphia and Potomac interests to New York as even the temporary capital was strong because, the argument ran, if Congress stayed in New York much longer, it would never leave. Representatives from Maryland were divided between the Potomac and Baltimore locations, two sites also favored by the Carolina interests.

By the end of June 1790, there seemed to be only halfhearted efforts to challenge the president's push for a permanent capital on the Potomac. Unable to match Washington's clout, Maclay lamented:

The President of the U. S. has (in my Opinion) had Great Influence in this Business. The Game

Was played by him and his Adherents of Virginia & Maryland between New York & Philada. to Give One of those places the Temporary Residence. But the permanent Residence on the Potowmack.⁴

The Senate returned to the temporary capital issue in another long day of debate on June 29. Again, the excitable Senator Izard showed "visible perturbation" and bounced "at a strange rate."⁵ Maryland Senator Charles Carroll proposed a temporary residence of ten years in Philadelphia, to which New York Senators Philip Schuyler and Rufus King countered with an offer to divide it between Philadelphia and New York, five years in each city. After some discussion the measure failed on the tie breaking vote of Vice President John Adams. The same provision failed again the following day.

It may well have seemed to some members of the fledgling Congress that the deadlock would persist ad infinitum. Some, too, may have wondered that Alexander Hamilton, the secretary of the treasury and a close adviser to the president, had not participated in the administration's push for the Potomac capital. Maclay, for instance, knew that if Hamilton were to join in, his forceful personality would be overwhelming: "If Hamilton has his hand in the Residence now," Maclay wrote, "he will have his Foot in it before the end of the Session."⁶ But the secretary was otherwise occupied with his funding proposal, a scheme in which the federal government would absorb debts incurred by states in waging the Revolutionary War. Thus, both the nation's debt and its credit would be held by the central government, consolidating its authority and fostering a greater sense of nationalism. Hamilton's plan was popular in northern states, where public debt was greater than in the south. There were fears that New England would leave the Union if its war debts were not taken over by the central government—some people predicted that the nation would dissolve into bickering confederations over this issue.

Thomas Jefferson, now secretary of state, understood that Hamilton needed southern votes to pass his plan for "assumption," as the scheme was known. He also knew that the Potomac capital would fail without some support from northern interests. A chance encounter with the secretary of the treasury led Jefferson to suggest an informal dinner in his rooms at which interested parties could discuss a



Philadelphia in 1858

by Ferdinand Richardt, 1858

The White House Collection

The Philadelphia County Court House was occupied by Congress from 1790 until 1800. The tower of Independence Hall, its celebrated neighbor on Chestnut Street, can be seen behind the trees.

the Potomac and to appoint a three-man commission to act as his personal representative in putting the law into effect. Congress did not then, nor would it for many years afterwards, appropriate funds for the enterprise. It set December 1800 as the time it would meet in its permanent home and directed that two buildings, a house for the president and a legislative hall, be ready by then. It would pack up and leave New York and reconvene in Philadelphia by the start of the third session, which was scheduled to begin on December 6, 1790. Once there, some still hoped that Congress would stay and that the idea of a Potomac capital would fade into oblivion.

THE FIRST BOARD AND L'ENFANT

*I*n January 1791 President Washington named three men to the board of commissioners that would manage the

affairs of the new city on the Potomac. While each had a personal stake in the venture's success, none were experienced in city planning, construction, or architecture. The first appointee was Daniel Carroll of Rock Creek, a member of one of the aristocratic families of Maryland, who had been voted out of Congress due to his support of Hamilton's assumption plan. Carroll's family roots ran deep in the neighborhood selected for the capital, and he shared Washington's interest in improving the navigation of the Potomac River through a system of locks and bypasses all the way to the Ohio River. The "Potowmack Company," as the venture was known, sought to open a navigable route to the west through which goods and settlers would pass, thus

earning handsome profits for the investors. The second appointee, also from Maryland, was Thomas Johnson, a member of the first and second Continental Congresses, the first governor of Maryland, and, after Washington, the second president of the Potowmack Company. In 1775 Johnson had nominated Washington to be commander-in-chief of the American armies at the beginning of the Revolution. To fill the third seat on the board, Washington appointed a member of his own family and inner circle, David Stuart of Virginia. He was married to the widow of Martha Washington's son, John Parke Custis. Stuart enjoyed Washington's friendship and shared his enthusiasm for locating the capital on the Potomac. Like the rest of the board, he was also an investor in the Potowmack Company.

The board's duties were broad and vague: every known and unknown aspect of the federal city came within its jurisdiction. Before a city could be laid out there had to be a plan, surveyors had to be employed to lay out streets and lots, and workmen had to be hired to clear the land. Washington arranged for the new federal territory to include his hometown of Alexandria on the Virginia side of the Potomac, and he selected a site just upriver for the capital. It would be established between the shallow waters of Rock Creek and the wide, deep Eastern Branch, later known as the Anacostia River, on the Maryland side. Beyond Rock Creek lay the port of Georgetown and, above it, the falls of the Potomac at the head of navigation.

On Washington's orders, the French-American engineer Pierre Charles L'Enfant was commissioned to design the city and the public buildings. He had asked the president for the job on Septem-

ber 11, 1789, ten months before the Residence Act became law:

The late determination of Congress to lay the foundation of a city which is to become the Capital of this vast Empire, offer so great an occasion of acquiring reputation . . . that Your Excellency will not be surprised that my ambition and the desire I have of becoming a useful citizen should lead me to wish to share in the undertaking . . . No nation perhaps had ever before the opportunity offered them of deliberately deciding on the spot where their Capital city should be fixed . . . I am fully sensible of the extent of the undertaking and under the hope of the continuation of the indulgence you have hitherto honored me with I now presume to solicit the favor of being Employed in this Business.⁹

Informing the commissioners of the president's decision to employ L'Enfant, Jefferson said that he was considered particularly qualified to draw the city's plan.¹⁰ A month later Secretary of State Jefferson asked L'Enfant to go to the site and meet with Andrew Ellicott, who had been employed to survey the ten-mile square federal district.¹¹ L'Enfant was to go over the ground, make drawings, and determine the locations of the President's House and the Capitol. By June, L'Enfant's ideas had sufficiently jelled to enable him to describe the principal features of the city plan. It had a grid street pattern over which broad diagonal avenues would be laid. Most of these grand avenues would radiate from the two principal buildings and give the city variety, direct routes between major points, and impressive vistas. The Capitol would be on Jenkins Hill, an elevated site that was like "a pedestal waiting for a monument."¹² The waters of a nearby spring could be diverted to cascade down the hill, giving the Capitol a sprightly podium. At the foot of Jenkins Hill, the principal public garden, or Mall, would begin its path westward to the Potomac more than a mile away. Along the edge of this green swath were places of "general resort . . . such sort of places as may be attractive to the learned and afford diversion to the idle."¹³ The Mall was also an ideal location for the equestrian statue of Washington voted by Congress in 1783. The President's House would be located on a line north of the statue, with a commanding view down the Potomac to Alexandria in the distance.

The President's House and Capitol would be linked by the grandest avenue of the city. It would

Pierre L'Enfant

Silhouette by Sarah DeHart, ca. 1785

U.S. Department of State

*T*rained at the Royal Academy of Painting and Sculpture in Paris, L'Enfant (1754–1825) came to America in 1776, serving with distinction in the Continental Army. He was promoted to captain of engineers in 1778 and to brevet major in 1783. Following the Revolution, he was asked to design the insignia for the Society of the Cincinnati, a prestigious fraternity of army officers serving under George Washington during the war.

L'Enfant was given the unprecedented opportunity of designing the new federal city, the President's House, and the Capitol. His failure to produce plans for the two principal buildings was a factor leading to his dismissal in 1792.



be named for the State of Pennsylvania, a tactical move meant to appease the enemies of the federal city who were working in Philadelphia to keep the capital there. (Washington was not pleased when he learned that the Pennsylvania legislature intended to build a capitol and a presidential mansion in Philadelphia as enticements. If the Potomac capital were not ready in time, Philadelphia would happily remain the seat of government indefinitely.)

L'Enfant's city plan included sites for fountains; a national church; squares for states to improve with statues, columns, or obelisks; and unassigned squares that might later be used for colleges and academies. Washington was pleased

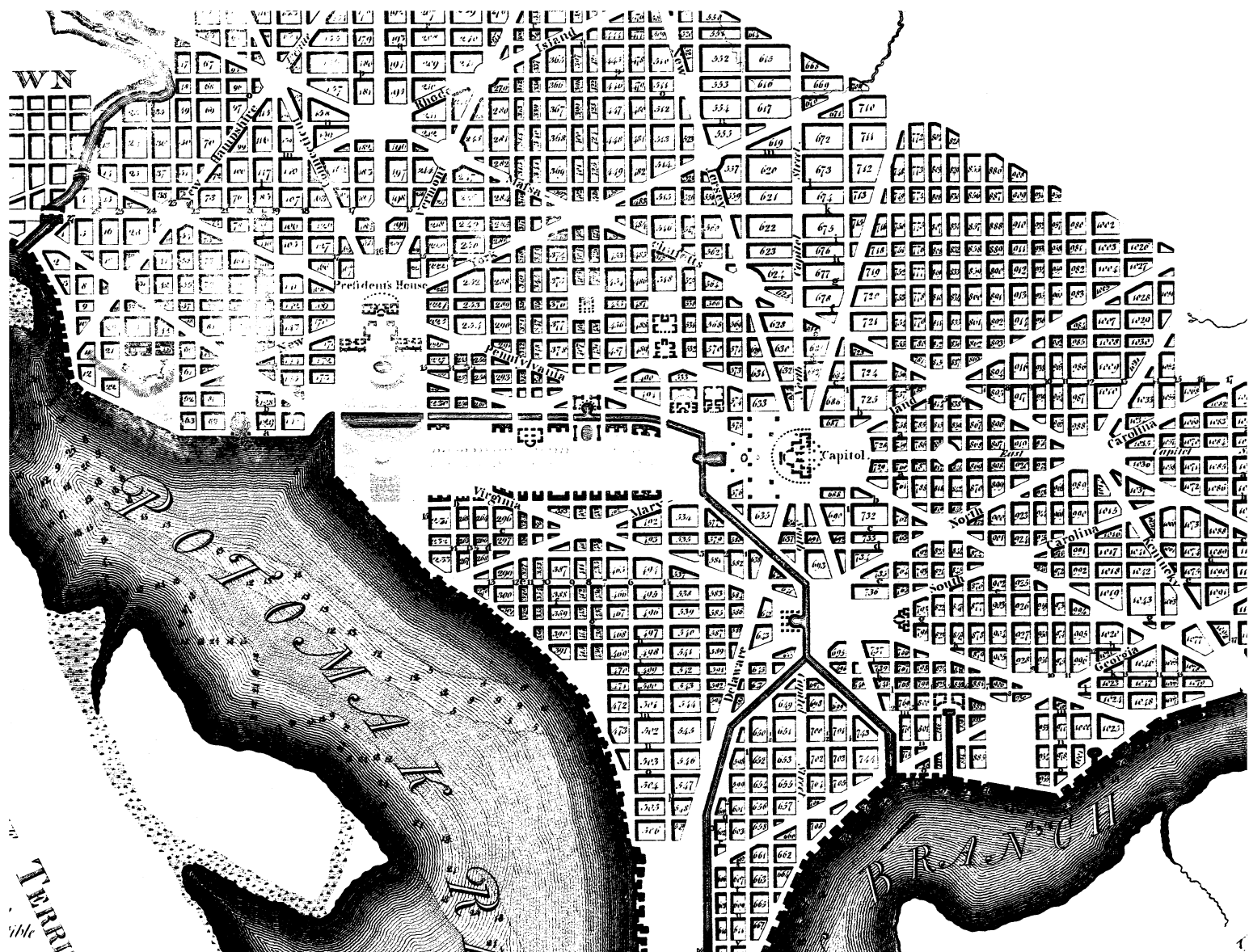
PLAN of the CITY of Washington (Detail)

by Pierre L'Enfant, 1791

Engraved by James Thackara and John Vallance

Library of Congress

L'Enfant's plan placed the Capitol and President's House far apart in separate sectors of the new federal city. While the separation expressed the constitutional division of power, the two principal buildings acted like magnets, attracting real estate development to those neighborhoods. On Jenkins Hill, along the Mall, and elsewhere on the map, the indication of monumental public buildings was a graphic device meant to convey a sense of grandeur and importance to the plan.



with the plan because it fulfilled his hopes for the city's enduring and useful future. Covering about eleven square miles, the city on paper was three square miles larger than London and ten square miles larger than Philadelphia.¹⁴ It aimed at being a truly national metropolis, a great federal capital that would help bind far-flung states into a united country.

Washington wanted the plan published as soon as possible, but before that could be arranged, the names of the federal district and the new capital had to be settled upon. On September 8, 1791, the commissioners met in Georgetown with Jefferson and Madison. There it was decided to name the city "Washington" and the territory "Columbia."

Prior to its publication Jefferson carefully scrutinized the city map and made editorial changes to the notes that explained its features. He clarified some of L'Enfant's clumsy English, added the names of the city and territory, and crossed out every reference to "Congress house" and wrote the word "Capitol" in its place. This seemingly minor clarification was significant, for it spoke volumes of the administration's aspirations for the Capitol and the nation it would serve. Instead of a mere house for Congress, the nation would have a capitol, a place of national purposes, a place with symbolic roots in the Roman Republic and steeped in its virtues of citizenship and ancient examples of self-government. The word was derived from the Latin *capitolium*, literally a city on a hill, but more particularly associated with the great Roman temple dedicated to Jupiter Optimus Maximus on the Capitoline Hill. When Jefferson substituted "Capitol" for "Congress House," he also followed the appellative precedent set by the Virginia House of Burgesses in 1699, when it authorized building a new "Capitoll" in Williamsburg.¹⁵ Most colonial legislatures met in a "statehouse."

Once the map was published, the world would see the intended scope of the federal city and understand the administration's high ambitions for it. On a more practical note, it was also necessary to have an accurate plan available when the first building lots were put up for sale in October. While in Philadelphia in September, L'Enfant provided an incomplete version of the plan to an obscure engraver named Narcisse Pigalle, who failed to publish the plan because he could not find a suitable sheet of copper. For the October sale L'Enfant

could have displayed his personal copy of the city plan but refused for fear that speculators would buy only the most desirable parcels. In disbelief, the commissioners pointed out the difficulty of selling lots without buyers knowing where they were located. Further, with the proceeds earmarked to finance construction of the President's House and Capitol, L'Enfant's refusal to hand over the city plan caused fears that nothing would get built at all. When the first public sale of lots was held on October 17, 1791 only thirty-five parcels were purchased, netting just \$2,000 in cash.¹⁶ Washington blamed L'Enfant for the disappointing results, sympathizing with investors who refused to buy a "pig in a poke."¹⁷

The second sale of lots was scheduled for the spring of 1792. Determined that there would be no excuse for this one proceeding under the same handicap that hampered the first, Washington ordered L'Enfant to ready the plan for publication. The final version was completed and delivered to the president on February 20, 1792. Andrew Ellcott finished the plan after making some alterations of his own. Having found L'Enfant to be completely ignoring the task at hand, Ellcott finished the plan and "engaged two good artists (both Americans) to execute the engraving."¹⁸ James Thackara and John Vallance of Philadelphia quickly produced a small version of the map that was published in *The Universal Asylum and Columbia Magazine* in March 1792. This gave Americans their first glimpse of their future capital city. While the partners worked on the large official version, Washington decided that another engraver should also be given the map in case Thackara and Vallance took too long. (They were, after all, from Philadelphia.) Samuel Hill of Boston was engaged to fill this second order as a backup.

The second sale of lots, like the first, proceeded without a published city plan. Hill's engraving, printed in Philadelphia by Robert Scott in October 1792, did not entirely please the president, but the version by Thackara and Vallance did. Both showed the same plan and used the same wording to explain its features, but the second plan was a more beautiful engraving, with two winged figures representing Freedom and Fame flanking a shield with the Washington family crest. Important, too, were the notations of the depths of the Potomac and Anacostia rivers that were missing from Hill's map.

Washington felt this information was vital in promoting the city's future commercial development. Both versions included what appeared to be grand buildings, a variety of vast structures with interesting features such as forecourts, domes, and porticoes. The suggestion of buildings added visual interest to the plan but did not represent real structures or designs. Rather, the images showed where buildings would be located and graphically promoted the idea of a monumental city.

L'Enfant's involvement in the creation of the nation's capital was a mixed blessing. He did, indeed, provide the visionary plan that is often cited as one of the finest conceptions of urban design, but his spirited personality and hot temper were his undoing. He never understood the role of the commissioners, considering Washington his sole patron and caring to please only him. By law, however, the commissioners were L'Enfant's employers, and for them he had only contempt. Despite the short time in which he planned the city (about five months), he seemingly was unable to follow through on other assignments. As 1791 slipped away, the commissioners worried about designs for the President's House and the Capitol. L'Enfant hinted that he had prepared plans for the principal buildings but was not ready to show them. Jefferson thought that the designs were carried in L'Enfant's head. Washington heard that John Trumbull (an artist and his former aide-de-camp) had been shown a design for the Capitol by L'Enfant, and Trumbull confirmed the story years later. It is certain, however, that none of the commissioners saw any architectural drawings and they complained that L'Enfant's workmen were digging on Jenkins Hill prior to the "adoption of unprepared plans."¹⁹ Laborers should, in their opinion, be digging clay for brick rather than digging foundations for buildings that no one knew anything about, much less had approved. They tried to redirect the men, but nobody would follow their orders. Early in 1792 Jefferson wrote diplomatically to L'Enfant that "the advance of the season begins to require that the plans for the buildings and other public works at the Federal city should be in readiness,"²⁰ but the engineer responded with a glib declaration that the work was great and he needed time to prepare great plans:

To change a wilderness into a city, to erect and beautify buildings etc, to that degree of

perfection necessary to receive the seat of government of a vast empire the short period of time that remains to effect these objects is an undertaking vast as it is novel.²¹

Such a statement did nothing to further the progress of the city, the President's House, or the Capitol—it was only buying time.

The final straw was L'Enfant's conspicuous lack of good sense when it came to the matter of the house being built for Daniel Carroll of Duddington (not to be confused with his distant relative, Commissioner Daniel Carroll of Rock Creek).²² Carroll inherited much of the area that would become Capitol Hill, and after the federal city was established he began construction of a large brick residence on his property in August 1791. Unaware that it encroached seven feet into what would become New Jersey Avenue, Carroll was understandably enraged when L'Enfant sent a crew to tear the building down. The site had been owned by the Carroll family for generations, while the street was nothing more than a line of ink on a piece of paper. Had L'Enfant been more prudent, an accommodation could have been reached. Instead, he acted as if everyone should submit to the plan and its author. Learning of L'Enfant's folly, Washington said that his actions "astonish me beyond measure."²³ His patience and faith gone, Washington agreed to let L'Enfant go. The task of firing L'Enfant fell to Jefferson, who wrote the engineer on February 27, 1792, that his "services must be at an end."²⁴ His "extravagant plans," his "mad zeal," and his "great confidence" could not compensate for insubordination and bad judgment.²⁵

THE COMPETITION OF 1792

Usually spring marks the beginning of the building season, but the spring of 1792 saw nothing done at the Capitol or the President's House due to the lack of plans. The top of Jenkins Hill was virtually untouched except for some unspecified site work undertaken by L'Enfant's workmen. Instead of echoing with the noise of hammers and saws Jenkins Hill was quiet, nearly deserted; the commotion typically stirred up by a large construction project was conspicuously



Brick Market, Newport, Rhode Island

by Peter Harrison, 1761–1772

Library of Congress



Maryland Statehouse, Annapolis

by Joseph Anderson, 1772–1779. Tower by Joseph Clark, 1787

Library of Congress



Delaware Statehouse, Dover

by Alexander Givan, 1788–1792

Library of Congress



Virginia State Capitol, Richmond

by Thomas Jefferson and Charles-Louis Clérisseau, 1785–1798

Library of Congress

*M*ost American public buildings in the late eighteenth century were based on domestic forms and details. A cupola was often the only feature that distinguished a public building from a private residence. A fine example is the Maryland Statehouse. While residential in form and spirit, its eye-catching tower proclaimed the building's public purpose. A smaller and more typical example is the Delaware Statehouse, completed the same year the Capitol competition was held.

Less frequently, public buildings were derived from nonresidential sources. An example is the Brick Market in Newport, a fairly sophisticated design adapted from a public building in London (the New Gallery of Somerset House) with a one-story arcade supporting the main floors articulated by two-story pilasters and a full entablature. Principal story windows were topped by alternating curved and triangular pediments.

The revolutionary Virginia Capitol was a clean break from the Georgian tradition in public architecture. It was adapted directly from the *Maison Carrée* in Nîmes, France, which Thomas Jefferson believed to be "the most precious morsel of architecture left to us by antiquity." The capitol's design was the earliest expression of neoclassicism in American architecture, helping launch the country's builders and architects on a half-century love affair with the antiquities of Greece and Rome.

Initially, President Washington did not articulate what he wanted the federal Capitol to be and had virtually no precedent to follow. Yet he believed the Capitol should overshadow statehouses of the Delaware and Maryland sort. The Virginia capitol offered a more monumental model, but its restrictive temple form could not be enlarged to accommodate Congress without incurring enormous expense. Eventually, a synthesis of Georgian architecture and neoclassicism would emerge from the protracted process of inventing and designing the United States Capitol.

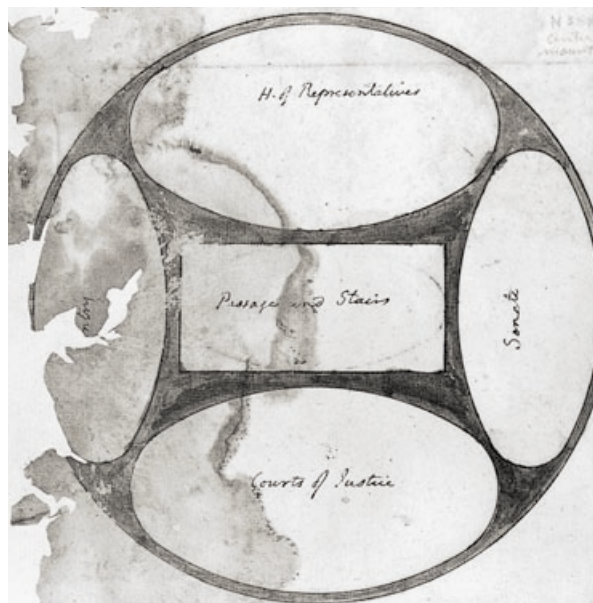
absent. Five months had been lost in waiting for L'Enfant to produce a design for the Capitol, and still more time would be needed to obtain a design from someone else. Jefferson wrote the commissioners to suggest they advertise for the plans. The suggestion was democratic and idealistic in its presumption that there was talent enough in the country to produce numerous designs from which to choose. Commissioner Thomas Johnson wrote a draft advertisement and sent it to the president for approval, and on March 6, 1792, Jefferson returned the draft with alterations. In the same letter he advised the commissioners to begin the cellars of both buildings and, anticipating a local shortage of skilled builders, suggested they look into importing

Germans and Highlanders. He also said that Daniel Carroll's house should be rebuilt, a regrettable but unavoidable expense.²⁶

The advertisement written by Commissioner Johnson was the first enumeration of the number and size of rooms needed for the Capitol. This and another prepared for the President's House were the first specifications ever written for federal buildings. The Capitol advertisement called for a brick building with a chamber for the House of Representatives and a conference room, each capable of seating 300 persons. The Senate would need a chamber covering 1,200 square feet, about the size of a room thirty-five feet square. These three principal rooms were to be two stories high, as were the lobbies at the entrances to the legislative chambers. Finally, twelve one-story rooms were needed to accommodate committees and clerks. Each of these was to be 600 square feet, or about twenty-five feet square.

Whether it was a matter of economy or insufficient foresight, the advertisement called for a relatively modest structure with fifteen rooms and two lobbies. Yet compared with Congress Hall in Philadelphia, the Capitol would have been spacious. That building had only four committee rooms, no conference rooms, no lobbies, and narrow corridors.²⁷ Federal Hall in New York, on the other hand, housed two legislative chambers, ten committee rooms, three offices, a two-story vestibule, a caretaker's apartment, a machinery room, an audience room, and a room for the New York Society library.²⁸ In terms of the internal accommodations, the administration probably had Federal Hall in mind when the Capitol advertisement was written; certainly it wanted something larger than Congress Hall. The only new feature was the large conference room, where the president would preside over joint sessions of Congress and deliver his annual message on the state of the union.

There was no mention in the advertisement of architecture or style; no mention of domes, porticoes, or columns. In a letter to L'Enfant more than a year previously, Jefferson had expressed his personal desire for a capitol designed after "one of the models of antiquity, which have had the approbation of thousands of years."²⁹ American taste could only improve, Jefferson thought, by exposure to copies of classical Roman architecture adapted to the practical needs of the new republic. Such buildings



Plan for the Capitol

by Thomas Jefferson, ca. 1792

Massachusetts Historical Society

*J*efferson wanted Congress housed in a replica of an ancient Roman temple, in a manner similar to the Virginia legislature's accommodation in a version of the Maison Carrée. Since the capitol in Richmond was an example of Roman "cubic" architecture, he thought the federal Capitol should be modeled after a "spherical" temple. This plan illustrates Jefferson's adaptation of the Pantheon in Rome for Congress and the "Courts of Justice."

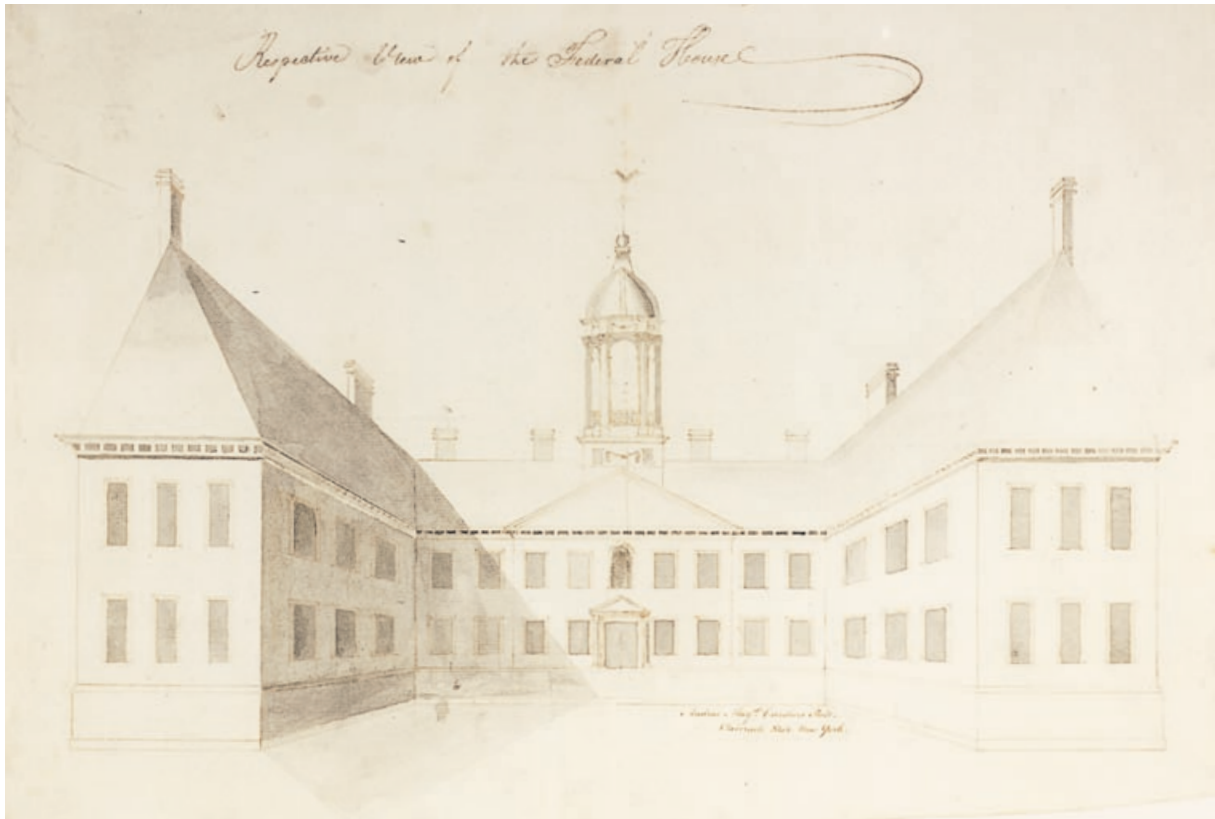
It is not known if the drawing was an intellectual exercise or a serious proposal, but the plan was more theoretical than practical. Jefferson later resurrected the plan for the Rotunda at the University of Virginia, where it proved more feasible for classrooms and a library.

would educate Americans at home and help America's reputation abroad. In 1785 Jefferson remarked: "I am an enthusiast on the subject of the arts . . . as its object is to improve the taste of my countrymen, to increase their reputation, to reconcile to them the respect of the world and procure them its praise."³⁰ His sensitivity to world opinion was partly national pride and partly a reaction to European theories regarding American inferiority, which he wished to prove false at every opportunity. The celebrated French naturalist George-Louis Buffon, for instance, hypothesized that the New World could not produce or sustain

animal or human populations equal to those in Europe and presented the theory as an example of America's inherent inferiority. To counter this ill-informed assumption, Jefferson presented Buffon with the bones of a huge American elk, the size of which forced him to retract his theory.³¹ In matters of American architecture, it would be more difficult to defend the national honor unless every opportunity was taken to cultivate taste in the fine arts. Jefferson thought the public buildings in the new federal city were a good place to put American architecture on the right footing and he hoped ancient Roman architecture would light the way. These antiquities offered the truth, taste, and timelessness that American architecture needed.

Jefferson's thoughts about architecture were absent from the commissioner's newspaper advertisement soliciting a Capitol design. They offered \$500 and a lot in the federal city as prizes for the best plan, while the runner-up would receive \$250. Entrants were expected to provide an elevation of each front of the building, sections, and floor plans. Estimates of brickwork necessary for the walls were also expected. This seemingly modest set of requirements actually included more drawings than were usually made for a building during this period, and the contestants were given little time to develop their designs. Dated March 15, 1792, the advertisement was sent to newspapers in Boston, Baltimore, Charleston, Richmond, Philadelphia, and New York; the commissioners expected the designs to be in their hands by July 15, 1792.

It is not certain exactly how many designs were submitted in the Capitol competition. Thirteen men are known to have entered and several others are mentioned as possible additions. Thirty-six drawings preserved by the Maryland Historical Society and one in the Library of Congress are the only ones known to survive today. These collections represent eighteen designs by ten men. The drawings form a remarkable body of evidence regarding the state of architectural draftsmanship and design ability in America at the close of the eighteenth century. Indeed, they are often used to illustrate the nonexistence of an architectural profession in this period, a time when most design services were provided by carpenters or master masons. When they were first published in 1896, architect and historian Glenn Brown wrote that the drawings "were made by amateurs or contractors



Respective View of the Federal House

by Andrew Mayfield Carshore, 1792

Maryland Historical Society, Baltimore, Maryland

Carshore's design met all the requirements for the Capitol enumerated by the board of commissioners, yet the result was no more imposing than a county courthouse. Carshore's attempt at perspective was adventurous but clumsy, two things that might be said of most entries in the competition of 1792.

Proposed Design for the Capitol

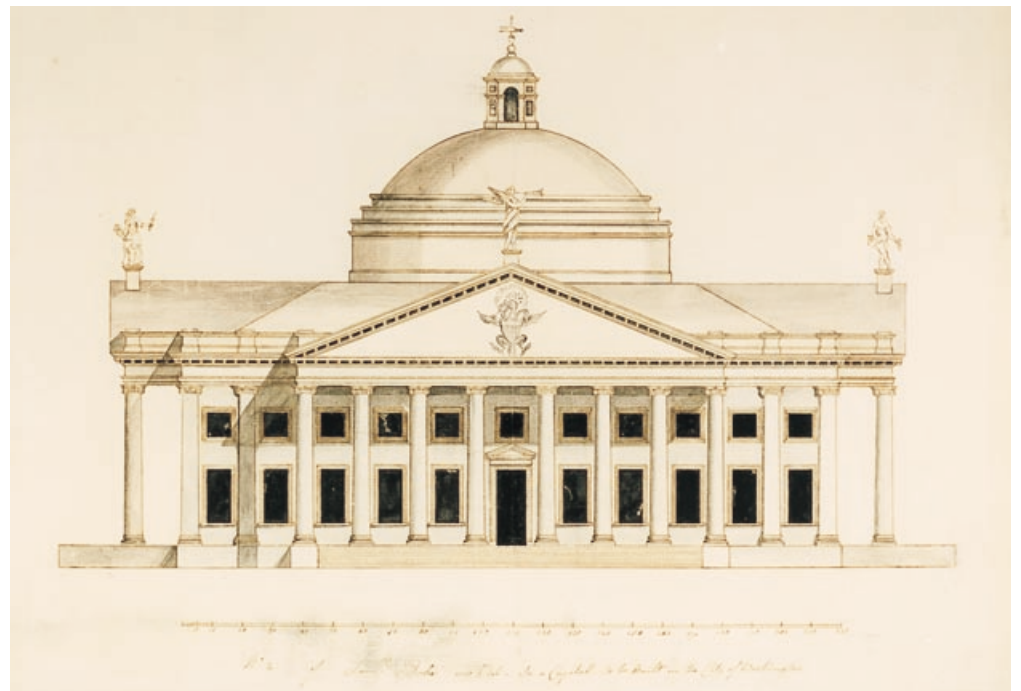
by Samuel Dobie, 1792

Maryland Historical Society, Baltimore, Maryland

A square mass, a portico for each elevation, and a central dome indicate that Dobie had the Villa Rotunda in mind in this proposal. Jefferson also admired Palladio's mid-sixteenth-century masterpiece located near Vicenza, Italy: he anonymously submitted a design for the President's House based on it.

who did not have the first idea as to what constituted either good draftsmanship or design or what were the necessary requisites of a Congressional Hall."³² Taken as a group, the drawings were fairly crude, but were also characteristic of the general draftsmanship skills of the period.

Brown's criticism was based partly on what he considered a general failure to understand the requirements of a "Congressional Hall." The fault really was that most entries followed the utilitarian nature of the published specifications virtually to the letter. The advertisement called for twelve



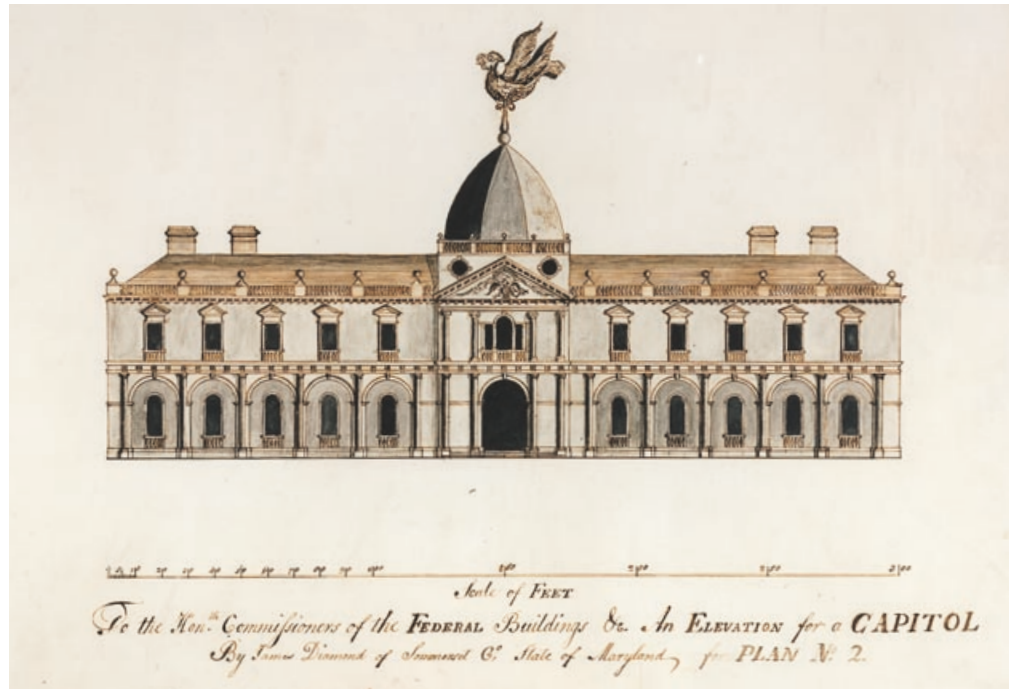
committee rooms, and only two entries failed to provide exactly that number. Each entry had a conference room and a chamber for the House of

An Elevation for a Capitol

by James Diamond, 1792

Maryland Historical Society, Baltimore, Maryland

Although ridiculed for the ungainly bird atop its dome, Diamond's drawing nonetheless incorporated a number of sophisticated design elements, including window frames capped with pediments and engaged Doric columns. Its plan was based on the Italian palazzo form with a square courtyard and interior arcade for sheltered circulation. More than anything else, Diamond's lack of artistic skill doomed his competition entry.

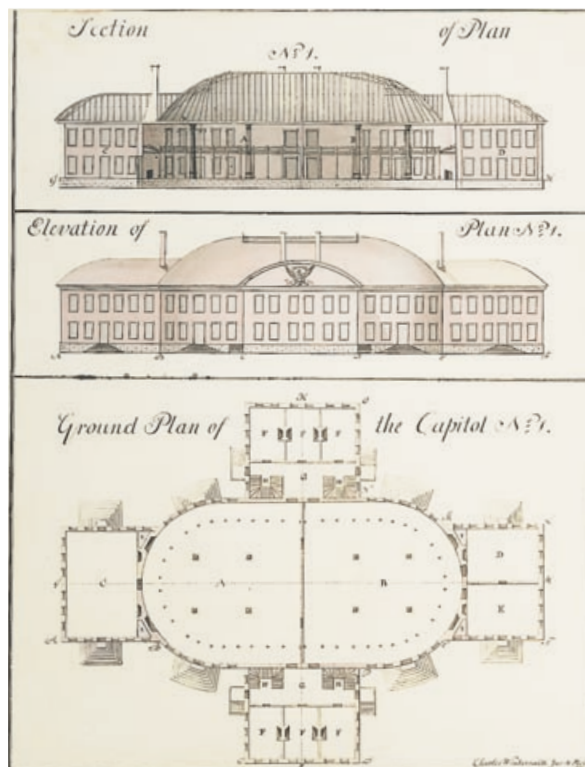


Proposed Design for the Capitol

by Charles Wintersmith, 1792

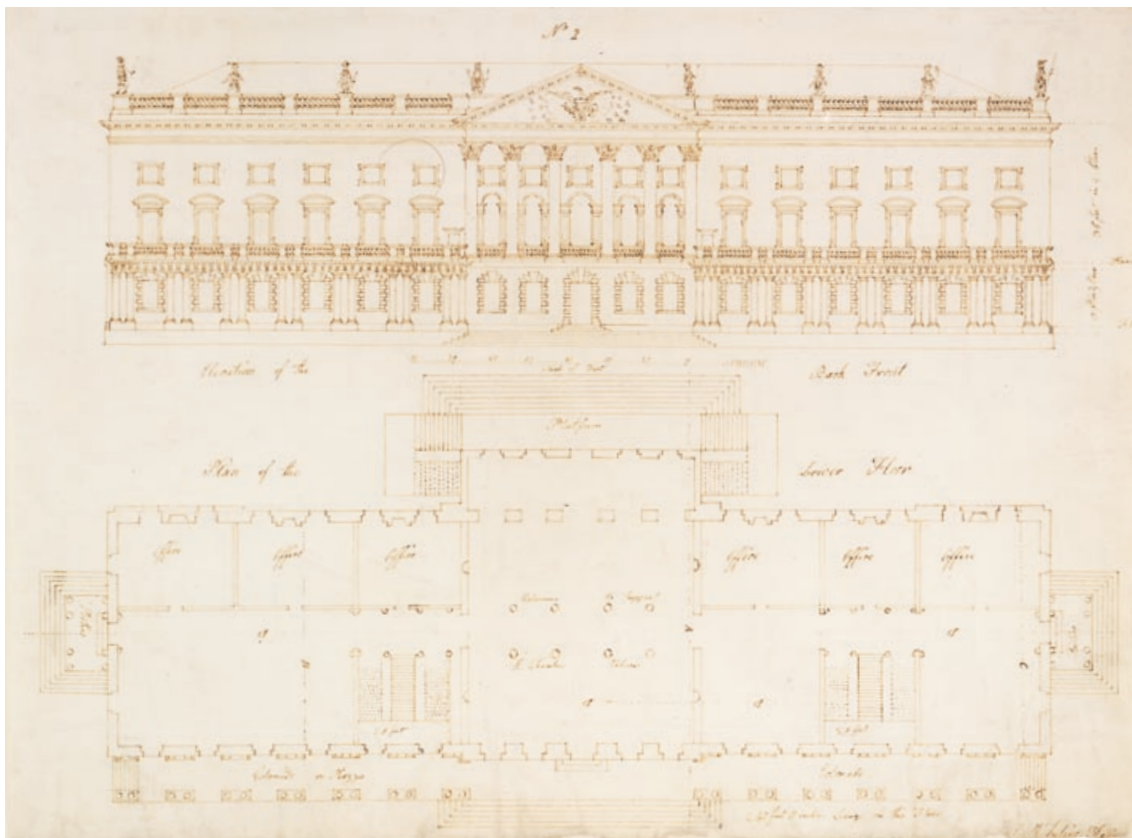
Maryland Historical Society, Baltimore, Maryland

When Wintersmith learned his design had not been approved, he wrote the secretary of state asking if it was too large. The remarkably unsophisticated floor plan failed to provide adequate horizontal or vertical circulation. The message conveyed by the Spartan exterior was more suited to an army barracks than to the seat of an aspiring republic.



Representatives of the same size as specified. Deviations from the published specifications appear to have been chiefly limited to the size of the Senate chamber: only Andrew Mayfield Carshore's design provided exactly 1,200 square feet as requested. Other competitors felt at liberty to give the Senate a larger room than called for. Samuel Dobie's Palladian design, for example, contained a Senate chamber 53 feet square, over double the size desired. The largest chamber, given in James Diamond's "Plan No. 4," was 44 feet wide by 96 feet long, with an area of 4,224 square feet, or about three and a half times the space wanted.

The men who submitted designs for the Capitol were as varied as the country itself. Two were veterans of General Burgoyne's army, one was a school teacher from upstate New York, one was a prominent builder and furniture maker from New England, one would later become mayor of Baltimore, another was a builder and politician, two were carpenters, three were master builders, one was a territorial judge, and one was a businessman. Only one was a professional architect in the modern meaning of the word. They were from Ireland, France, England, and Germany as well as native born. Despite their diverse backgrounds and training, each would have called himself an architect. To some of their contemporaries, being



**Proposed Design
for the Capitol**

by Samuel McIntire, 1792

Maryland Historical Society,
Baltimore, Maryland

McIntire's design was one of the better proposals submitted to the commissioners. Its three-story height and imposing length gave it the dimensions necessary to impart a feeling of importance, while its Corinthian portico gave a hint of Roman grandeur. Eagles, stars, and allegorical figures above the balustrade provided the building with its decorative iconography. The absence of a dome and certain problems with the floor plan were, however, fatal shortcomings.

an architect was a learned hobby or skill—like writing poetry or playing music. To others, an architect was synonymous with being a master builder.

Few among the competitors are well-remembered today. Only Samuel McIntire left a mark on American culture beyond his footnote in the history of the United States Capitol. The houses he designed and built for the wealthy merchants in Salem, Massachusetts, and the furniture he made or carved were celebrated accomplishments that have long made him famous. For McIntire, unlike other competitors, participation in this contest was only a minor disappointment in an otherwise notable career.

The only professional architect in the competition of 1792 was Etienne (Stephen) Sulpice Hallet, a native of Paris who came to the United States around 1790. He first settled in Philadelphia and worked a while for L'Enfant as a draftsman. In 1791, Hallet drew a plan and elevation of a capitol that he showed to Secretary of State Jefferson and a few others. This design, later dubbed the “fancy piece,” was prophetic. It had a domed center building flanked by wings expressing the bicameral

nature of the legislative branch. However, it was considered unrealistic, and perhaps too French for American tastes, and the design was shelved for the time being. Hallet's entry in the 1792 competition reflected Jefferson's ideas about a temple-form building, a so-called “model of antiquity.” The plan met all the requirements stated in the advertisement, but it was a tight fit. At the request of the commissioners, Hallet later refined his ideas for the Capitol, drawing upon his ideas from his “fancy piece,” and eventually made a substantial contribution to the approved design.


As they received the drawings that came to Philadelphia, Washington and Jefferson may have realized that the competition was not such a good idea after all. Washington was clearly disappointed with what he saw. To the commissioners he predicted that “if none more elegant than these should appear . . . the exhibition of architecture will be a very dull one indeed.”³³

Although not truly satisfied with any of the designs, Washington liked certain things about certain ones. Judge George Turner's design (now lost) included a dome that struck the president favorably.

He thought a dome would give the Capitol “beauty and grandeur” and might be a useful place to mount a clock or hang a bell.³⁴ The biggest problem with Turner’s design, however, was the lack of an executive apartment. A room for the president and a dome soon became indispensable features for the Capitol in Washington’s mind, although neither had been mentioned in the advertisement. It is uncertain why Washington came to think of an executive apartment and a dome as necessary, but it is clear that his thoughts regarding the Capitol continued to evolve as he looked over the designs. A presidential apartment, although of little architectural significance, would be a practical convenience for the chief executive when visiting the Capitol. A dome, on the other hand, would set the Capitol apart from any other building in America, where domes were unknown. Several statehouses were crowned by towers or lanterns, but a classical dome carried on a drum would be something new and grand. It would help give the Capitol prestige and would be a welcome addition to the city’s skyline.

The Capitol was not off to a good start. First L’Enfant disappointed the president and significantly delayed the work by his failure to design the building. Then the competition had brought in a bewildering hodgepodge of designs more suited for county courthouses than for the nation’s Capitol. Fortunately, the competition for the President’s House fared better when a design by James Hoban, an Irish born architect from Charleston, was selected. The Capitol competition closed in the summer of 1792 without a winning design. Another building season was lost.

THE CONFERENCE PLAN: AN UNEASY COMPROMISE

 At the end of August 1792, President Washington went to Georgetown to attend a commissioners’ meeting. Judge George Turner and Stephen Hallet were asked to attend as well, and a now-lost design by Samuel Blodget, a young businessman from Boston, was to be reviewed. During the meeting Judge Turner bowed out of the contest and Blod-

get’s design was evidently rejected. Before the end of the meeting all hopes were squarely with Hallet. This winnowing of the field could not have been entirely surprising: he was, after all, the only trained architect in the competition, and he had given the Capitol more thought than anyone except, perhaps, Jefferson.³⁵

Hallet had brought to the meeting an enlarged version of his temple form design, a variation of his failed competition entry. Jefferson probably encouraged him, still hoping to shoehorn Congress into a “model of antiquity.” While more ample, Hallet’s second temple scheme was rejected as impractical and too expensive. Washington and the commissioners now asked him to rethink the “fancy piece.” It had not been entered into the competition but was now viewed with high hopes. Hallet was asked to polish it into a more economical version with a more practical floor plan accommodating a conference room, a presidential apartment, and more committee rooms. Frills were to be kept to a minimum.

Hallet’s pre-competition plan consisted of five parts: a domed center section with a rotunda; two flanking square courtyards; and two wings, each with a large legislative chamber and four committee rooms. As historian Pamela Scott has pointed out, Hallet modeled the dome after the chapel of the Collège des Quatre Nations in Paris.³⁶ He finished the first of two variations of the “fancy piece” by the time of the October sale of lots, thus allowing Washington to show potential buyers what the administration might build on Jenkins Hill in order to stimulate investment in that neighborhood. This new design greatly elongated the central section but preserved the rotunda and added a chamber for the Senate behind it. The legislative chambers were better scaled for the membership of the House and Senate, and twenty rooms were provided for offices and committees on the first floor alone. The second variation, finished in January 1793, had a central Ionic portico, flanking wings with Palladian windows, sculpted panels, and allegorical statuary. Hallet’s second variation was the best of the lot, yet there remained the matter of high cost and a nagging suspicion that the design was still too French, not quite American in feeling.

In July 1792, the commissioners received a letter from Dr. William Thornton, who wrote from his plantation on the island of Tortola in the West



Elevation of the “Fancy Piece”

by Stephen Hallet, 1791

Library of Congress

*H*allet's pre-competition design was the earliest documented attempt at a plan for America's Capitol. It was unlike anything ever seen in the United States. It was grand and monumental—just as Washington wanted—but it was also too foreign and promised to be too expensive. Yet with its central dome and flanking wings, the “Fancy Piece” was a prophetic composition.

Indies. He had heard about the competitions for the President's House and the Capitol and, although the deadlines had passed, wanted to know if he could still submit designs. The commissioners told Thornton that a design had been selected for the President's House but they would welcome a plan for the Capitol. Thus encouraged, Thornton labored furiously on his island home to produce a design for the Capitol; much later he would claim that he worked “day and night.”³⁷ He took his design to Philadelphia in the last days of 1792 and was told to give it to Jefferson for the president's consideration. Before sending it along, however, he had a talk with his friend Judge George Turner, and he soon learned about the failed entries and the administration's evolving thoughts about the Capitol. Prudently, Thornton put aside his “Tortola scheme” and at once began a new design, one that would be “more suited to the situation.”³⁸

In January 1793, Thornton was ready with his new design. The president was immediately taken with it, lavishing high praise for its “Grandeur, Simplicity, and Beauty.”³⁹ Jefferson, too, was impressed. He wrote Commissioner Johnson:

Dr. Thornton's plan of a capitol has been produced and has so captivated the eyes and judgment of all as to leave no doubt you will prefer it when it shall be exhibited to you . . . It is simple, noble, beautiful, excellently distributed, and moderate in size . . . and among it admirers

no one is more delighted than him [President Washington] whose decision is most important.⁴⁰

Thornton's design was partly an essay in the emerging neoclassical style and partly an orthodox, high-style Georgian building. Its centerpiece was a domed rotunda fronted by a Corinthian portico. The portico, with twelve Corinthian columns standing on a one-story arcade, provided a sheltered carriage way and a balcony similar to those at Federal Hall in New York but larger and grander. The dome and portico were both reminiscent of the great Roman temple known as the Pantheon built in the second century A.D. by the emperor Hadrian. Thornton's adaptation of the Pantheon for his United States Capitol linked the new republic to the classical world and to its ideas of civic virtue and self-government. (It did not matter that the Pantheon was built during the Roman Empire rather than during the Republic.) Two wings flanking the central section were designed



Tortola Scheme

by **Dr. William Thornton, 1792**

Prints & Drawing Collection, The Octagon Museum, Washington, D. C.

Thornton's initial idea for the Capitol was essentially a large house with wings. The interior of the center building contained the legislative chambers, a conference room, and two committee rooms. Since there were no staircases, all rooms were two stories high. Wings contained more committee rooms.

in a conventional Georgian manner with a rusticated ground story supporting Corinthian pilasters and a full entablature. Curving pediments top the principal floor windows. Considering its scale, the elaborateness of the Corinthian order, the rich window treatment, and its dome, no standing structure in America could compare with Thornton's proposed Capitol.

Like other gentleman architects of the time, Thornton studied classical architecture in publications by such authors as Andrea Palladio and Sir William Chambers. In other published sources he studied the great buildings of Europe (especially Great Britain) to learn about the principles of composition. He was familiar with Colin Campbell's

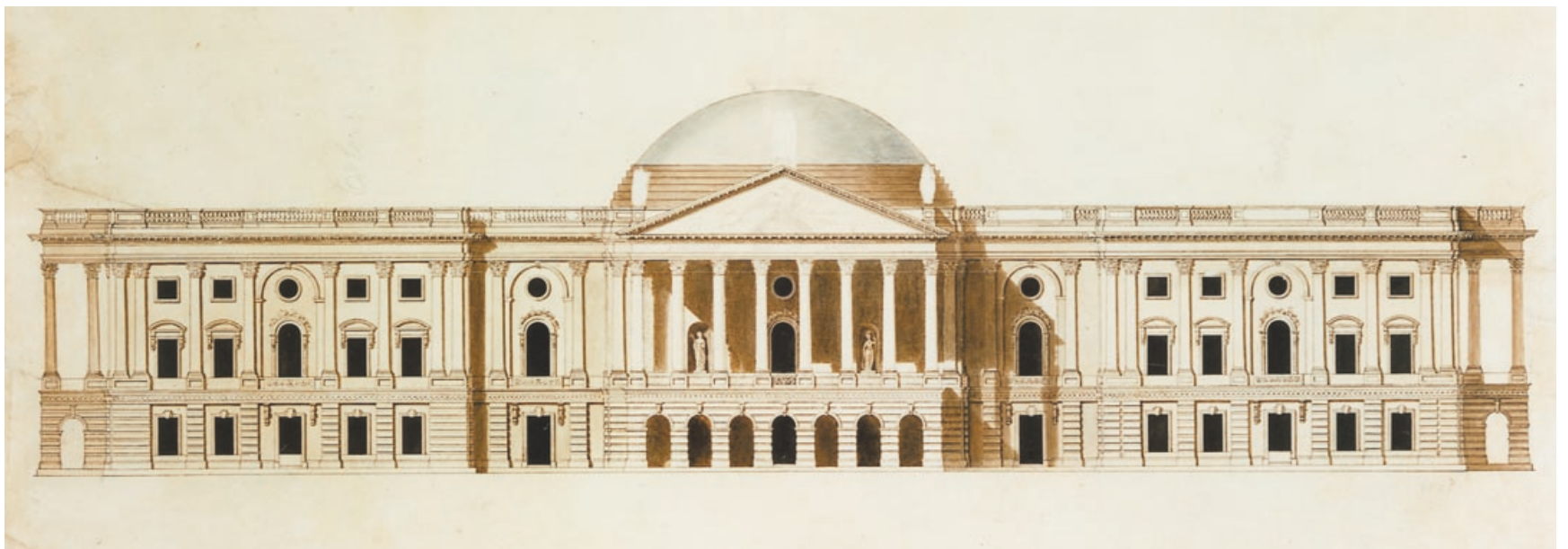
Vitruvius Britannicus (first volume 1715), a collection of engravings showing the great houses of Britain. Indeed, Thornton's first design for the Capitol—the one that he brought to Philadelphia but did not show—so resembled a residence that for years it was misidentified as an entry in the President's House competition. Although separated by only a few weeks, the "Tortola scheme" and the winning design for the Capitol are so different in quality that it is difficult to believe that they are by the same man. Some light may be shed on this contrast by John Trumbull's later (and wonderfully tantalizing) recollection that while in Philadelphia Thornton was "assisted by a Russian Officer of Engineers;"⁴¹ this description probably refers to Thornton's friend John Jacob Ulrich Rivardi, a Swiss engineer who had served in the Russian army.⁴² While uncertain, Rivardi's role in the design process may account for the sudden and dramatic improvement in Thornton's architectural and drafting skills.

A few days after being notified by the commissioners that Dr. Thornton's design had been approved, Hallet responded with yet another

design for the Capitol, the only one encompassing his ideas alone and not another variation of the “fancy piece.” This new design retained the idea of two wings flanking a center building, but now the center building was deeply recessed between the wings. The earlier high baroque dome was replaced by a low, neoclassical dome over a conference room. Its semicircular projection from the main body of the Capitol was the dominant feature of the garden front, which would face the Mall to the west. Its similarity to Thornton’s west elevation and, indeed, its similarity to the Capitol footprint shown on L’Enfant’s city plan, has been speculated upon by a number of historians.⁴³ The coincidence, however, has never been adequately explained.

On February 7, 1793, the commissioners wrote the secretary of state regarding Thornton’s win-

ning design and its effects on Hallet, who had invested considerable time and effort developing variations on the “fancy piece” and was hard at work on yet another design. They told Jefferson: “Tho’ the Plan of a Capitol [is] so highly satisfactory to the President, and all who have seen it, we feel sensibly for poor Hallet, and shall do everything in our power to sooth him.” For his part, Hallet asked that a final decision on the matter be postponed until his drawings were finished. On April 5, 1793, however, Dr. Thornton’s design for the Capitol was awarded the prize of \$500 and a building lot in the city of Washington. To compensate “poor Hallet,” the commissioners gave him £100, which was worth nearly the same as \$500 and a city lot. But they also asked him to study Thornton’s design and report on the feasibility of

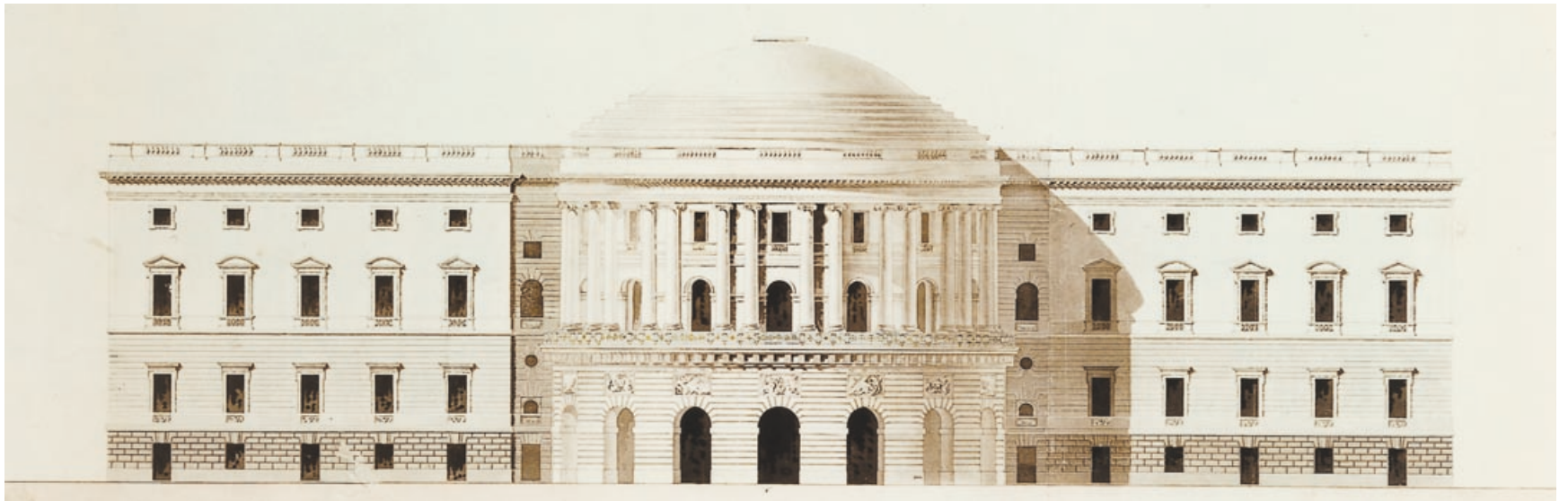


Design for the Capitol, East Elevation

by Dr. William Thornton, ca. 1793–1797

Library of Congress

*T*he central dome and portico, derived from the Roman Pantheon, were two elements of Thornton’s design looking forward to the emerging neoclassical taste in art and architecture. Other elements, such as the Corinthian pilasters, the rusticated ground story, and the ornamental window frames, were more conventional features similar to those at the Brick Market in Newport. In this drawing, Thornton (possibly assisted by John Rivardi, an obscure Swiss engineer) struck the right balance between the rising neoclassicism that accorded with Jefferson’s taste and the familiar but fading Georgian style with which Washington was more comfortable.



Final Capitol Design

by Stephen Hallet, 1793

Library of Congress

*H*allet's last attempt at a Capitol design was his first not to follow the suggestions of others. His efforts were too late, however, as a newcomer's design had already won Washington's approval. This elevation shows Hallet's proposed west front with a semicircular conference room topped by a low neoclassical dome based on the ancient Pantheon in Rome.

its construction, placing him effectively in the position of a consulting architect expected to evaluate his rival's work. In making this request, the commissioners showed an astonishingly poor understanding of human nature and ethics.

Hallet issued his report at the end of June 1793; naturally, he tried to devastate Thornton's design. It would take thirty years to build, he predicted, and the cost would be staggering. He said that the columns of the portico were too far apart, the upper windows of the Senate chamber were blocked by a coved ceiling, the president's apartment had no windows at all, the ground story was badly lighted and poorly laid out, and there was a "want of unity between the ornaments and the order." A serious problem was found in the conference room, which was bisected by a screen of columns that would block views and render the room awkward to use. The dome over the rotunda was carried on columns placed too far apart. Staircases did not have enough headroom. (See Plan A, page 39.)

Thornton was given an opportunity to respond to Hallet's report. This was the first of many times he defended himself against critics, using wit and sarcasm to compensate for his lack of training or experience. He countered Hallet's allegations by stating that they gave too much attention to "trifling inaccuracies in the plan." The expensive, ornamental parts could be delayed, he argued, so their immediate expense was not really a problem. The expected growth of the nation demanded a large Capitol, and his was not too large. Any problems in the construction could be overcome, he asserted, by employing people who knew how to build. He pointed to several larger structures in Europe that had overcome greater difficulties and had been built in less time than the seven and a half years remaining before it would be occupied by Congress. Noting that his reply was limited to only a few observations answering "voluminous objections," he implied that more could be said if "Mr. Hallet's report had been written in a more legible hand."⁴⁴

Despite Thornton's assurances, the problems in his plan alarmed the commissioners and caused considerable chagrin for the president, who had merely assumed the plans were workable. Although he realized that it was "unlucky that this investigation of Doctor Thornton's plan, and estimate of the cost had not preceded the adoption of it,"⁴⁵ he still thought the exterior was beautiful, and he would tolerate no more delay. While professing to know nothing of architecture himself, Washington hoped knowledgeable people could correct the errors

and he asked Jefferson to host a conference to iron out the problems. His instruction on the matter was unambiguous: “The case is important. A Plan must be adopted; and good, or bad, it must be entered upon.”⁴⁶ Clearly, there was to be no turning back now.

In his Philadelphia office, the secretary of state gathered together all parties concerned with the Capitol problem. The two adversaries, Hallet and Thornton, were there. Hoban, the architect of the President’s House, traveled from the federal city to attend, and two Philadelphia builders, William Williams and Thomas Carstairs, were brought in as impartial advisors. Even the president himself attended part of the meeting. On July 17, 1793, Jefferson wrote to inform Washington of the agreement that had been reached at the end of the conference.⁴⁷ He told of a floor plan brought by Hallet that could be fitted into Thornton’s design for the outside. (See Plan B, page 39.) Everyone at the conference considered the new floor plan a great improvement, especially as it concerned the two wings. Admittedly, it had one serious defect; the central section and portico were recessed between the wings and therefore would be virtually hidden except when seen head-on. Hallet was instructed to study how his plan could restore the portico to the line of the wings as shown in Thornton’s elevation. However, the design and plan of the wings were things all could agree on, and, most important, construction of those parts could begin soon. Good or bad, what would become known as the “conference plan” was adopted, and the Capitol’s architectural honors would be shared (in theory, at least) by Stephen Hallet, author of the floor plan, and William Thornton, author of the exterior elevation.

The outcome of Jefferson’s conference had one particularly odd (although not long-lasting) consequence. According to the building’s hierarchy shown in Thornton’s elevation, the principal rooms were intended to occupy the second level—the *piano nobile*. These rooms would reside above a rusticated ground story containing less important rooms. Yet in the conference plan, the House and Senate chambers were put on the ground level, which resulted in an architectural “disagreement” between the inside arrangement and the outside elevation. For architectural and sentimental reasons, Jefferson wanted the House chamber to be contained within a three-story volume so it could have a dome

like the one over the Paris grain market, which he adored. While serving as the American Minister to France, he had often visited the famous Halle au Blé in the company of his intimate friend Maria Cosway. Together they admired the sparkling ribbons of glass alternating between wooden ribs, and Jefferson became so enamored with its architectural effect that he later determined to have it replicated over the House chamber.⁴⁸ He suggested lowering the floor of the chamber to the ground level so that the dome would be hidden from outside views. Thus, the wings would match, but the House chamber would have a dazzling and unexpected interior dome unlike anything previously attempted in American architecture. Any trick to accommodate this dome was acceptable to Jefferson, whose obsession with it was neither characteristic nor particularly admirable. The resulting violation of a basic architectural rule was troublesome to future architects and was only resolved with great effort and expense—ironically enough, during Jefferson’s presidency a decade later.

THE FIRST CORNERSTONE

Soon after the “conference plan” was adopted, surveyors were sent to Jenkins Hill to stake out the location of the Capitol’s wings. Meanwhile, the commissioners hired Stephen Hallet to oversee construction, partly as compensation for his past efforts and partly because he designed the floor plan of the wings. Supervising Hallet was James Hoban, the architect of the President’s House, who after a year’s employment in the federal city had proven entirely satisfactory. As the city’s “surveyor of public buildings,” he supervised construction of all four federal buildings undertaken in the 1790s.⁴⁹ He was expected to concentrate his efforts on the President’s House, coming to the Capitol only when Hallet needed the benefit of a more experienced builder. Hoban’s command of the English language was also better than Hallet’s, and this was probably considered an advantage when dealing with contractors and workmen.

Following the lines staked out by the city’s surveying department, laborers began digging the

Capitol's foundations during the last days of July 1793. Masons who finished the foundations at the President's House on August 7 began laying stone for the Capitol's foundations the next day. Around this time Commissioner David Stuart wrote other members of the board about a ceremony to mark the beginnings of the Capitol. His letter reminded his colleagues of the cornerstone ceremony at the President's House held the previous year and asked if the Capitol should not be begun under similarly formal circumstances. Although the subject had been overlooked at their last meeting, it was not too late to assemble the board and lay a "foundation stone."⁵⁰

At their September 2 meeting, the commissioners decided to host a much more elaborate ceremony than the one held at the President's House. Now at least a year behind schedule, the whole project had gotten off to such a discouraging start that a grand display of pomp was highly desirable to help restore confidence. The cornerstone would be laid on Wednesday, September 18, 1793, during the first large public event staged in the federal city—an event that was a guaranteed success because the president was scheduled to attend. The public ceremony may have been Washington's idea: he, as much as anyone, understood the importance of ceremony and ritual. As the first president, he skillfully managed protocol and the role of ceremony for the office. He also was a Mason, and, like the ceremony at the President's House a year earlier, the Capitol's cornerstone would be laid with Masonic rites. The newspaper invitation announcing the cornerstone ceremony was directed to the Masonic fraternity:

The Capitol is in progression – the southeast is yet kept vacant that [the] corner stone is to be laid with the assistance of the brotherhood [on] the 18th Inst. Those of the craft however dispersed are requested to join the work. The solemnity is expected to equal the occasion.⁵¹

Contemporary Masonic practice included the laying of an inscribed metal plate along with a cornerstone. The brass plate used at the President's House in 1792 had been made by Caleb Bentley, a Quaker clockmaker and silversmith who lived in Georgetown not far from Suter's Fountain Inn, where the commissioners held their meetings. The commissioners returned to Bentley in the summer

of 1793 for another plate, this one made of silver, for the Capitol ceremony.⁵²

Considering the short notice, the cornerstone ceremony was well attended. The proceedings were reported in an article in *The Columbia Mirror and Alexandria Gazette*, which remains the only known eyewitness account of the event. Activities began at 10:00 a.m. with the appearance of President Washington and his entourage on the south bank of the Potomac River. Crossing the river with the president was a company of volunteer artillery from Alexandria. The procession joined Masonic lodges from Maryland and Virginia, and all marched to the President's Square, where they met the new lodge from the federal city. Together they marched two abreast, "with music playing, drums beating, colors flying, and spectators rejoicing," to the site of the Capitol about a mile and a half away. There the procession reformed and Washington, flanked by Joseph Clark (the Grand Master) and Dr. E. C. Dick (the master of the Virginia lodge), stood to the east of a "huge stone" while the others formed a circle west of it. Soon, the engraved plate was delivered and the inscription read:

This South East corner stone, of the Capitol of the United States of America in the City of Washington, was laid on the 18th day of September, in the thirteenth year of American Independence, in the first year of the second term of the Presidency of George Washington, whose virtues in the civil administration of his country have been as conspicuous and beneficial, as his Military valor and prudence have been useful in establishing her liberties, and in the year of Masonry 5793, by the Grand Lodge of Maryland, several lodges under its jurisdiction, and Lodge 22, from Alexandria, Virginia.

Thomas Johnson	
David Stuart	Commissioners
Daniel Carroll	
Joseph Clark	R. W. G. M.—P. T.
James Hoban	Architects
Stephen Hallate	
Collen Williamson	M. Mason

The plate was handed to Washington, who stepped down into the foundation trench, laid the plate on the ground, and lowered the cornerstone onto it. With the president were Joseph Clark and three "worshipful masters" bearing the corn, wine, and oil used to consecrate the stone. Chanting accompanied Washington's ascent from the trench. Clark gave a hastily prepared speech punctuated by numerous volleys from the artillery. Following

the formal exercises, a 500 pound ox was barbecued and those in attendance “generally partook, with every abundance of other recreation.” By dark the festivities had ended.⁵³

Five days after the cornerstone was laid, the commissioners formally approved Washington’s suggestion to face the President’s House and Capitol with freestone. Brick, of course, had been specified in the newspaper advertisement and was the material most often used for buildings of the best sort in the region. The expense of stone and the general lack of stone workers limited its use to the trim for brick buildings. While dressed stone buildings were not unheard of, they were exceedingly rare. The idea of using stone for the Capitol, however, had been under discussion at least since March 1792, when Jefferson recalled a conversation between the president and a Mr. Stewart of Baltimore regarding an idea of facing the public buildings with different colored stones.⁵⁴ The President’s House and Capitol were to be huge buildings by American standards, and facing them in stone would only heighten the sense of permanence and grandeur.

The sandstone (also called freestone) quarries around Aquia Creek, Virginia, had been the source of most local stone since the seventeenth century and would supply the federal city as well. They produced a fine-grained brownish stone that did not contain bedding layers and could therefore be worked “freely” in any direction (hence the term *freestone*). Even before plans of the public buildings were in hand, it was obvious that a great new city would require a reliable supply of stone. In 1791, L’Enfant had negotiated the purchase of a quarry from the Brent family on Wiggington’s Island at the mouth of Aquia Creek where it entered the Potomac River, about forty miles downstream from Washington. The proximity of the quarry to water transportation was as important a factor to its selection as any other consideration. Sturdy, flat-bottomed boats called scows were used to bring the stone to the federal city, where a wharf was built at the foot of New Jersey Avenue to receive the cargo destined for the Capitol. A wharf at Goose Creek (sometimes called Tiber Creek) served the President’s House.

Finding workmen to quarry, cut, and carve stone was a problem the commissioners and their successors faced for years. There were virtually no

local craftsmen to hire, and what few there were fashioned little things like tombstones and steps. Europe was the best source of masons to work in the federal city. Collen Williamson, Scottish stone mason recently arrived in America and a relative of innkeeper John Suter, was the first to be invited to work on the federal buildings. He took charge of the stone department in 1792 and oversaw the laying of the foundations at the President’s House and the Capitol. He also ran the quarrying operations at Aquia, using a great deal of slave labor. In July 1792, a stonecutter from England named George Blagden was recommended to the commissioners by Adam Traquair, a Philadelphia stone merchant. Blagden’s employment in Washington began in 1794 and continued for thirty-two years. At the commissioners’ request, George Walker, a Philadelphia merchant and large investor in Washington real estate, called on stone workers during a visit to London, but had more luck in Scotland where he recruited masons from Lodge No. 8 in Edinburgh. The commissioners agreed to pay the travel expenses to America incurred by these workmen, whose employment at home suffered during the Napoleonic Wars. Among them was Robert Brown, who would spend a long career helping to build the city of Washington.

In the spring of 1794, the commissioners put the foundation work at the Capitol under two contracts and asked Collen Williamson to provide general superintendence. A local mason named Cornelius McDermott Roe was hired to lay the foundations of one wing (probably the south wing), and James and John Maitland, Robert Brown, and John Delahanty, direct from Europe, were employed on the other wing. Roe’s contract stipulated that stone was to be brought to the site at the public’s expense and that the commissioners would allow him to use some of the laborers on their payroll. He could not find enough hands on his own and would repay their wages from his fee. He was to be paid six shillings (\$0.80) per perch for laying stone in straight walls and seven shillings, six pence (\$1.00) per perch for curving walls. (A perch usually equals about twenty-five cubic feet of stone.) The masons working on the other wing, however, were paid four shillings, six pence (\$0.60) per perch, and this difference soon led to unrest. The team of Brown, Delahanty, and James and John Maitland petitioned the commissioners to speed

stone delivery or at least give them preference to Roe when stone was brought to the Capitol. They pointed out that since Roe was being paid more, he “could better afford to be idle.”⁵⁵

While the workmen were having problems at the Capitol, the commissioners began to have problems with Hallet. At their June 1794 meeting, they asked him for designs and details for several parts of the Capitol.⁵⁶ These were to show how he planned to treat the center section, how he planned to restore the portico to the line of the wings, and how much progress had been made on the details. Like L’Enfant before him, though, Hallet refused to cooperate. The commissioners were understandably concerned that workmen were already digging the foundation trenches for the building’s center section before any plan had been presented—much less approved—especially since they could see that the foundations did not provide for the great round vestibule, or rotunda, that was Washington’s favorite part of the design. Dr. Thornton (who was prone to exaggerate) recalled the president’s reaction to Hallet’s omission of the rotunda, saying that he “expressed his disapprobation in a stile of such warmth as his dignity and self-command seldom permitted.”⁵⁷ The commissioners warned Hallet that he had no authority to proceed on the center building until they and the president had approved it.


Another matter of some concern was that Hallet’s direct orders to the masons and laborers undermined Williamson’s authority as head of the stone department. The commissioners wrote Hallet saying they wished the foundation work to be directed by Williamson, who was the only one authorized to oversee masons. The commissioners cautioned Hallet that they could not “intrust the same piece of business to the direction of two heads capable of pursuing different wills.”⁵⁸ Hallet, however, was uninterested in the chain of command. He also found the commissioners’ request for drawings annoying. He was the author of the plan, was confident that he had been hired to build it, and apparently thought further approvals unnecessary. When the commissioners reprimanded him for building foundations that clearly deviated from Dr. Thornton’s plan, Hallet angrily asserted that Thornton had nothing to do with the building’s plan:

I misunderstood your mind as to the Plan. So far that I thought to be indebted for the adoption of mine to its total difference with the other . . . I

never thought of introducing in it anything belonging to Dr. Thornton’s exhibition. So I claim the genuine invention of the plan now executing and beg leave to say hereafter before you and the President the proofs of my right to it.⁵⁹

It is difficult to understand why Hallet refused to show the commissioners his new plans. He had devised a variation of the “conference plan” that included a courtyard between the conference room and the east portico, which was advanced beyond the east face of the wings.⁶⁰ (See Plan C, page 39.) Thus, the portico was restored to the position shown in Dr. Thornton’s elevation and became a portal through which the central courtyard was reached. The courtyard replaced the grand vestibule as the central feature, avoiding the strange juxtaposition of a domed conference room behind a domed rotunda. It was a reasonable solution but resulted in an exterior that did not exactly match Dr. Thornton’s elevation. Perhaps Hallet thought the commissioners would not approve such a departure and hoped to push construction far enough that they would be obliged to accept it as a *fait accompli*. If this was the case, he was sadly mistaken. On June 28, 1794, the same day on which he wrote to “claim the genuine invention of the plan,” Hallet was dismissed for refusing to show his plans to the commissioners, for proceeding with construction without approval, and for refusing to submit to Hoban’s supervision. Thus, another high-handed employee fell to the charge of insubordination.

“SCENES OF VILLAINY”

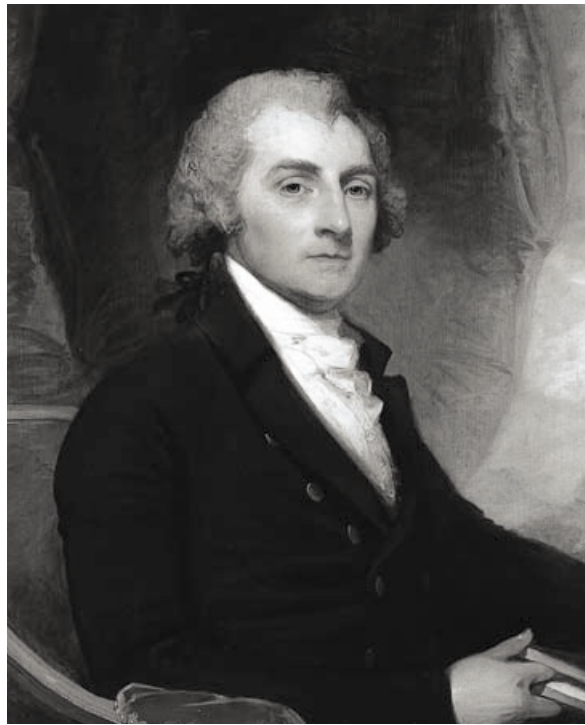
 After Hallet’s dismissal nothing more was done in the Capitol’s center section. The foundation trenches remained empty of stone, and no more work would be done there for a quarter-century. Workmen continued to lay the foundations of the wings, which had been under way for a year without much to show for it. The south wing contractor used a shortcut method known as the “continental trench,” which meant unloading stone and mortar into the trench without laying the stones regularly or to bond them uniformly with mortar. Masons on the north wing worked more professionally but neglected to provide air holes for ventilation. Such

openings were necessary to prevent trapping moisture that would destroy wooden framing and floor boards, which would be installed later. The commissioners were relying on Williamson and Hoban to guarantee the work, but neither seemed to notice the shoddy workmanship.

Even though he was spared these details, President Washington was unhappy with the state of affairs in the federal city. Construction was not progressing rapidly enough in the face of a relentless deadline, and the city's enemies were convinced that Congress would never move to the Potomac to live in tents and govern from huts. The president determined that the board should be replenished with men willing to devote their full energies to the city. Henceforth, they would be required to live there and would receive an annual salary of \$1,600 as compensation for full-time employment. Two of the original commissioners, Thomas Johnson and David Stuart, were happy to quit. Johnson was in poor health, and Stuart's attendance became unpredictable. Daniel Carroll agreed to stay on until his replacement was named.

Unfortunately, the hard work and low pay of the job made it difficult to fill with worthy men. The president asked his former secretary, Tobias Lear, and Maryland Senator Richard Potts to fill a seat, but both declined. The first person to accept an appointment to the second board was Gustavus Scott from Maryland's Eastern Shore. Like all previous commissioners, Scott was an investor in the Potowmack Company, and as a state legislator, he had promoted the interests of improved navigation on that river. Scott was a forty-one-year-old lawyer who brought much needed legal expertise to the board.

Scott's appointment was made in August 1794 and was followed a month later by that of Dr. William Thornton, the amateur architect whose elevation of the Capitol so delighted the president. Thornton's artistic talent was not the reason Washington named him to the board, however. It was his enthusiasm for the Potomac capital that convinced the president that he would work tirelessly to advance construction of the city. The president wrote: "The Doct. is sensible and indefatigable, I am told, in the execution of whatever he engages; to which might be added his taste for architecture, but being little known doubts arise on that head."⁶¹ With Hallet gone, Thornton could



Portrait of William Thornton

by Gilbert Stuart, 1804

National Gallery of Art,
Andrew W. Mellon
Collection

*T*hornton

(1759–1828) was born into a Quaker family on the island of Tortola in the British West Indies. He spent his youth in Lancashire, England, and trained in Scotland as a physician. He rarely practiced his profession, preferring instead to dabble in literature, drawing, architecture, mechanics, and horse racing. He is best remembered for drawing the winning elevation of the United States Capitol, which earned him \$500 and a building lot in the new federal city (lot fifteen in square 634).

In 1794, President Washington appointed Thornton to the board of commissioners overseeing the affairs of the federal city. He served until the board was abolished in 1802. In that year, President Jefferson appointed him the clerk in the State Department in charge of issuing patents, a post he held until his death. During his long residence in the city of Washington, Thornton used much of his time, energy, and wit defending the Capitol design from its critics.

ensure that the Capitol would be built according to the approved design.

Filling the final seat on the second board was Alexander White, the former congressman from Virginia who played a small but crucial role in passage of the Residence Act. In Jefferson's Philadelphia dining room, White had dropped his opposition to Hamilton's assumption plan in exchange for northern votes to pass the Residence Act. Unlike Daniel Carroll's, White's vote had not cost him his seat in Congress, and his subsequent appointment to the board of commissioners was partly due to his support for the Potomac capital. White's financial interest in the Potowmack Company and his willingness to serve were factors as well.

Before White took his seat on May 18, 1795, the board was made up of Daniel Carroll, Gustavus Scott, and William Thornton. This interim board dealt with many of the same problems that nagged its predecessor, namely the perpetual lack of money, building materials, and workmen. They ordered Elisha Owens Williams to keep up the supply of foundation stone for the Capitol and to purchase blankets, bedding, porringers, and pots for the public hospital, where sick workmen recuperated. He was also to find fresh provisions of rice, sugar, and vinegar for the hospital.⁶² To help supply

the manpower needs of the city, the commissioners resolved to hire “good laboring Negroes by the year, the Masters clothing them well and finding them a blanket.” The commissioners would feed the slaves and pay their masters sixty dollars a year.⁶³ Williams was asked to hire 100 slaves under these terms and to buy Indian meal to feed them.

During the first week of December 1794, the commissioners focused on the stone supply for the next building season. Williamson was asked to estimate the amount of stone needed to finish the foundations and basement story of the Capitol, but he said such an estimate was impossible unless he was “privileged with the plan,” indicating that Hallet still held on to the only plans of the building.⁶⁴ He could, however, say that the foundations required 608 perches of stone to raise them one foot. Two thousand tons of ashlar were ordered from quarries on the Chapawamsic Creek in Stafford County, Virginia, owned by James Reid, James Smith, and George Walker, who had “free and uninterrupted” use of the cranes for unloading vessels at the wharf.⁶⁵ (Much of that stone, however, was later found to be unfit.) A second order for 4,500 tons of sandstone was placed with Daniel Brent and John Cooke, who were given free use of the public quarry at Aquia.⁶⁶ The commissioners provided three cranes for loading stone as well as a \$1,000 cash advance. A stone worker from Norwich, England, named John Dobson was hired at the end of 1794 to cut, prepare, and lay the freestone at the Capitol. Each type of stone cutting task was priced according to the skill and time involved in its execution. Simple ashlar used for the plain wall surfaces was valued at three shillings (\$0.40) per foot, while more complicated modillions and dentils commanded eight shillings (\$1.05). Molded, circular column bases were most expensive at ten shillings (\$1.33) a foot. Dobson was in charge of one of the most visible and important aspects of the construction of the Capitol and was given use of a house on the grounds as a part of the bargain.⁶⁷

On New Year’s Day 1795, the commissioners reported how they had spent £20,000 (\$53,000) on the Capitol. Temporary buildings had been constructed, including the carpenters’ hall, lime house, stone shed, and others for workmen. Five hundred tons of freestone was being worked by twenty of Dobson’s men. Timber from Col. Henry Lee’s

“Stratford Hall” plantation in Westmoreland County, Virginia, accounted for £1,000 (\$2,650). About 200 perches of foundation stone was on Capitol Hill while another 1,250 tons was at the wharf. They also had a contract for 5,000 bushels of lime. The only major item not on hand or under contract was northern white pine needed for flooring, but the commissioners thought it could be found near Norfolk.⁶⁸

Two days after their report was issued, the commissioners wrote the president about the inadequacy of their funds, complaining of difficulties with the “Virginia donation.”⁶⁹ Both Maryland and Virginia had promised cash donations when they offered land for the federal territory. Virginia now found it difficult to follow through with its \$120,000 pledge, and the cash-strapped commissioners began to feel the squeeze. Aggravating the situation was the real estate syndicate of Greenleaf, Morris, and Nicholson, which had negotiated a purchase of 6,000 city lots in 1793 on very favorable terms: eighty dollars for each lot, payable over a seven-year period. The deal promised a steady flow of cash into the city’s coffers, yet after a year or two, the coffers were still empty. The overextended speculators could not uphold their part of the bargain.

Broken promises and sour deals left the commissioners without the financial resources necessary to build the public buildings at the brisk pace President Washington wanted. They needed to find ways to economize. On January 29, 1795, before the first block of sandstone was laid on the Capitol’s walls, the commissioners asked the president if it would be wiser to “forgo carrying on more of that building than the immediate accommodation of Congress may require.”⁷⁰ They implied that the Capitol could be built in stages, one wing at a time. With limited means it was logical to divide the project into phases. The north wing, they contended, would be finished first because it had the most rooms and would better accommodate Congress than the south wing. That section, with its one large room for the House of Representatives, would be built second. The central rotunda area was largely ceremonial and its construction would be put off until last.

Despite its common-sense approach, Washington was disappointed with the idea of building the Capitol piecemeal. He had known that the building was an ambitious undertaking but had thought—until now—that it could be put under roof by the

year 1800, with only its expensive decoration delayed. He had written in March 1793 that

it should be considered, that the external of the building will be the only *immediate* expense to be incurred. The internal work and many of the ornamental without, may be finished gradually, as the means will permit, and still the whole completed within the time contemplated by law for the use of the building.⁷¹

That strategy was unfortunately impractical. The most expensive, ornamental parts of the building were the exterior Corinthian pilasters, columns, and entablature, and these could not be easily separated from the rest of the building like tacked on decorations. It would be folly to build plain walls and try to apply the Corinthian order at a later time. Given the financial situation, the only course was to build the Capitol bit by expensive bit.

Lack of funds also affected personnel matters. When Hallet was dismissed in June 1794, the commissioners did not seek a replacement for some months. Learning of the opening, however, John Trumbull, then the secretary to John Jay's delegation in London, wrote them about a promising young architect named George Hadfield, whom he thought perfectly suited to carry on with the Capitol. On December 18, 1794, the commissioners replied that there were no vacancies but assured him that a general "Spirit for improvement" would present possibilities for Hadfield's future employment in America.⁷²

If the truth were told, the commissioners had an opening for an architect but no money to pay him. By the middle of the next month, however, a promising development offered some hope of relief from the city's cash crisis: the commissioners were going to ask Congress for a loan. In February 1795 Dr. Thornton went to Philadelphia to begin negotiating a loan, an idea that was approved by the president. It would take more than a year for the loan to be secured, but the promise of financial assistance lifted the commissioners' spirits. They could now consider filling the vacancy at the Capitol with Trumbull's young friend.

Hadfield and Trumbull had become friends in 1784, when the architect attended the Royal Academy and the artist was a student of the American expatriate Benjamin West. For six years Hadfield worked in James Wyatt's office. He was awarded the first Traveling Royal Academy

Fellowship in 1790, which paid for a four-year stay in Rome. Upon returning to England, the depressed conditions in the building trades left little work for him. The economy and his pro-American father may have influenced Hadfield's decision to accept the commissioners' offer to come to the United States and supervise construction of the new Capitol, a project that offered prestige and steady employment. Sight unseen, Hadfield accepted the job on March 7, 1795. Trumbull arranged passage to Washington.

While the commissioners waited for Hadfield, they managed the work as best they could. William O'Neale proposed to deliver foundation stone to the Capitol for \$1.31½ per perch if given "the liberty to quarry [it] from the Publick property on Rock Creek."⁷³ He told them that the Capitol's wharf was blocked by stones that had fallen into the river, making it necessary to clear them away so cargo ships could unload.⁷⁴ After his deliveries began, O'Neale's supply of foundation stone did not come fast enough to keep the masons busy, and the commissioners threatened to sue unless it was delivered faster. There was also a problem with where some of O'Neale's stone was coming from. He had been given permission to gather stone from the streets, but he was hauling stone from privately owned property.⁷⁵ This left the streets cluttered with fieldstone, while building lots were being cleared at public expense.

By June 1795, the commissioners finally took notice of the slipshod construction on the Capitol's foundations—a section of the foundation that fell to the ground got their attention—and began inquiries into the matter. James McGrath, who had worked on the south wing foundations for a year, testified that he never used the continental trench method himself, although he had observed other masons neglecting their work.⁷⁶ The commissioners found that the foundations of the south wing were so bad that demolition and reconstruction were the only remedies. Although work on the north wing was also defective, it could be repaired and secured by laying large bond stones. In a report to the new secretary of state, Edmund Randolph, the commissioners tried to put the best face on an unfortunate situation:

Bad work has been put up the walls in some parts, prudence requires they should be taken down . . . the outside walls of the North Wing

are good which will amply employ the free stone setters so that no delay will ensue. And these people have given ample security so ultimately the public will not be losers.⁷⁷

Reported “scenes of villainy” among the contractors were apparently true. The excellent reputation of the principal contractor of the south wing foundation, Cornelius McDermott Roe, had not justified the faith placed in his work, the true character of which escaped detection. Roe attributed criticism to the “malaise of a party against him,” but his excuses did him no good.⁷⁸ He was dismissed and later was sued for the cost of repairing the faulty foundations.

On Monday, July 13, 1795, the first block of Aquia Creek sandstone was set into place on the outside walls of the north wing. During the following week George Blagden took over the supervision of stone setting; this work would previously have been done by Collen Williamson, but he too had been dismissed at the beginning of the building season. Williamson was old and cantankerous and did not get along with Hoban. Upon his dismissal he blamed the architect and some of the city’s other Catholics for his fate. In a letter to the commissioners he boasted of having taught “archastry” (his term for vaulting) in Scotland and New York and asserted that he was more experienced in “weighty” (his term for masonry) buildings than anyone else on the North American continent. He claimed to have been persecuted by the “Irish vegbond,” but neither the commissioners nor the administration was moved to restore him to his former position.

During the summer of 1795, the height of the Capitol’s third building season, dismal weather and more problems with contractors slowed progress. It was so hot at the end of July that the Scottish masons threatened to quit unless they were housed closer to the Capitol. They claimed that walking to and from their hotel three times a day injured their health. The heat wave finally broke when heavy rains came during the first week of August. John Mitchell complained that he could only keep five brick kilns going on Capitol Hill; the wet weather prevented more from being fired up. By the terms of his contract he was obligated to supply 500,000 bricks for the Capitol, but because of the rain he could furnish only 360,000. Despite the shortfall, Mitchell asked the commissioners to pay him \$100 a week in hauling fees so he could meet his “calls.”⁷⁹ And, troublesome

as it was, the shortage of brick was a minor problem compared to the sudden disappearance of stone worker John Dobson. He forfeited his contract, deserted eight stone cutters in his employ, and fled the city owing \$2,000. The workmen clamored for their pay from the commissioners.

“STABILITY, ECONOMY, CONVENIENCE, BEAUTY”

Soon after George Hadfield arrived in the federal city in October 1795, he ventured to give a frank opinion regarding the design and construction of the Capitol. He examined what few drawings there were and went all over the work. His first letter to the commissioners contained some general observations, none of which were particularly flattering. Even so, he realized that it was important to get along with his employers and hoped his remarks would be viewed as professional advice. He was equally polite about the architectural shortcomings of the Capitol:

I find the building begun, but do not find the necessary plans to carry on a work of this importance, and I think there are defects that are not warrantable, in most of the branches that constitute the profession of an architect, Stability—Economy—Convenience—Beauty. There will be material inconvenience in the apartments, deformity in the rooms, chimneys and windows placed without symmetry. . . .⁸⁰

Studying Hallet’s plans and Dr. Thornton’s east elevation, Hadfield soon learned that the floor plan was not reconciled with the outside of the building. It was evident that the principal rooms of the Capitol were destined to begin at ground level. To solve the problem he proposed removing the rusticated basement from the outside elevation altogether. Thus, the exterior pilasters, columns, and windows with pediments—architectural elements associated with the most important part of the building’s hierarchy—would be lowered to the same level as the principal rooms. To give the building proper height, five feet would be added to the upper story and the exterior columns, pilasters, and entablature would be enlarged accordingly. In Hadfield’s

plan the portico became a grand entrance instead of a balcony:

I think the design may be improved by omitting the basement throughout the building, by this means, expense would be saved; the Legislative Body ought occupy the principal part of the Building instead of the basement; the Portico would not be useless, and grandeur and propriety would be increased from the Order beginning from the ground.⁸¹

Hadfield pointed out that, while eliminating the basement would save a third of the building's cost, enlarging the upper story and the outside columns would add only one sixth to the cost. The existing foundations were "in a state not to be depended upon and any means that were made use of to lessen the wait [i.e., weight] of the building would certainly be advantageous."⁸² But if it were absolutely necessary to have a three-story Capitol, Hadfield suggested adding an attic. Thus, the columns would still begin at the ground level, the same level as the principal rooms. Both proposals solved a nagging architectural problem while utilizing the existing foundations. Only a few courses of rusticated sandstone already in place would be lost to either plan.

Five days after Hadfield offered his proposal, Dr. Thornton wrote a long letter to the president stating his objections. He apologized for its length but thought the issue was important enough to

justify intruding on the "weighty concerns of state." After acknowledging Hadfield's "genius," Thornton complained that the alterations were suggested only to enhance the young architect's reputation by "innovating throughout," thus earning him fame for redesigning America's Capitol. And if Hadfield succeeded, Thornton's unstated fear was for his own place in its history.

Thornton never acknowledged the problem Hadfield was trying to solve, nor did he explain its roots in Jefferson's desire for a House chamber topped by a dome. Instead, he touted a list of famous English country houses with basements to show the president that this feature was popular in some of the best buildings of Britain and therefore unobjectionable:

Wentworth house, which is an elegant palace belonging to the Marquis of Rockingham six hundred feet in length of the same order viz.

Revised Design of the Capitol

by George Hadfield, 1795

Maryland Historical Society, Baltimore, Maryland

*H*adfield proposed eliminating the basement story so the Corinthian order could begin at the ground story where the legislative chambers were to be located. Thus, the ground story would become the most important level in the building's architectural hierarchy. His revised design conformed to the foundations already laid out by his predecessor, Stephen Hallet.



the Corinthian with a rustic basement. Worktop Manor House belonging to the Duke of Norfolk three hundred feet in extent yet only a small part of a superb building yet contemplated. It is of the same order & has a rustic basement. Holkham House—345 feet—Heveningham Hall, which is a very elegant structure has a line of pilasters supported on a rustic arcade that runs the whole length—Chiswick House, the seat of the Duke of Devonshire has a rustic basement supporting fluted columns of the Corinthian order. Wentworth Castle abt. 6 miles from Wentworth House, seat of the Earl of Strafford, is of the same order on a rustic arcade. Wanstead House is also Corinthian on a rustic basement & is considered as a very chaste & beautiful building. It was designed by the author of the Book on Architecture called Vitruvius Britannicus. These may serve to show that a basement (rusticated) is not only proper but adopted by many of the first architects.⁸³

Thornton may have sounded knowledgeable, but his letter failed to address the issues at hand. (In fact, none of the houses cited placed principal rooms in the basement story. That level contained the kitchens and pantries, while the drawing rooms were always upstairs.) Hadfield's resolution of the Capitol's most serious architectural problem was an affront that Thornton found too great to bear in silence.

Hadfield and Hoban soon went to Philadelphia to confer with the president about the proposed changes. Washington was annoyed by the dispute and refused to make any further decisions regarding matters he felt lay outside his area of expertise. In a letter to the commissioners he pleaded ignorance of architecture (a plea that was too modest) and said that he did not have the means of acquiring sufficient knowledge about the merits of the case. He was too busy on the eve of a session of Congress to do the job he expected the commissioners to perform. As long as the changes did not involve a loss of time and money, Washington declared that he would not object because "the present plan is nobody's, but a compound of everybody's." He sternly reminded the commissioners that their position in the federal city, with access to all the information regarding materials and labor, placed them in a better position to make decisions.

With Blagden's help, Hadfield estimated the savings that would be realized with his two-story design. Eliminating the basement story would save \$20,736, while the cost of increasing the height of the upper story and enlarging the Corinthian order

would cost an additional \$15,460. Despite the sorry state of the city's finances, saving more than \$5,200 did not impress the board. Hoban sided with Thornton and both condemned Hadfield's plan on the grounds that it posed serious structural dangers (the exact nature of which was not recorded). Hoban declared that if Hadfield was unable to build the Capitol on the adopted plan he would do it himself. Thus, faced with the determined opposition of one commissioner allied with a trusted architect and builder, Hadfield's case was hopeless. By the third week of November his proposal was rejected. He had been on the job less than six weeks.

Soon after the commissioners decided not to alter the elevation of the Capitol, the winter of 1795–1796 set in, bringing the building season to a close. The quarry stockpiled stone for the next year's work, and Hadfield reported that there were enough bricks on hand to keep the masons busy if only the north wing were carried on.⁸⁴ As workmen drifted away from the city, Commissioner Alexander White went to Philadelphia to attend the opening of Congress. He took with him a memorial on the subject of the public buildings and the prospect of finishing them in time for the removal of government in 1800. The memorial, which President Washington transmitted to the House and Senate on January 8, 1796, explained the commissioners' predicament. Unless they had a steady supply of cash, the public buildings would not be finished in time. They had raised \$95,000 from the sale of lots and had an inventory of 4,700 unsold lots worth at least \$1.5 million but could not secure a loan from Europe because lenders scoffed at the 6 percent cap on interest imposed by Maryland law. Rather than depend on the sale of property or the collection of debts, the commissioners wanted a loan guaranteed by Congress secured by the value of unsold lots. They did not want an appropriation, simply a promise from the government that the debt would be repaid: "All the buildings . . . will be erected in a convenient and elegant style, and in due time, and (what is, perhaps, unparalleled among nations) at private expense."⁸⁵

A select committee headed by Jeremiah Smith of New Hampshire was appointed by the House of Representatives to study the commissioners' memorial and reported its findings on January 25, 1796. The committee determined that \$140,000 would be needed annually over the next five years to bring

the public buildings to a reasonable state of completion and predicted that the commissioners could raise only \$40,000 a year on their own. It therefore recommended that Congress guarantee a loan of \$500,000 at a rate not exceeding 6 percent for the federal buildings, with no more than \$200,000 available in any one year.⁸⁶

Smith's report released a flood of questions regarding the city, its management, its relation to Congress, the rights of private landowners, the state of public confidence, and the regard of world opinion. It was the first time that Congress took up the issue of federal buildings and the opinions expressed were diverse and remarkably uninformed. According to Jeremiah Crabb of Maryland, those against the loan guarantee were in "impolitic violation of public faith and private rights," and a vote against the loan was a vote of no confidence in the Potomac capital.⁸⁷ On February 22, 1796, John Nicholas of Virginia rose to give his thoughts on the measure but was drowned out by the noise of cannons firing and drums beating in celebration of the president's birthday. Zephaniah Swift of Connecticut made himself heard over the outside noise when he declared that the good name of the United States was sufficient and he did not see the necessity of guaranteeing it in a bill. Others spoke that day for and against the loan on principle, and still others wished the bill to take other forms. Near the end of the day's business, Joseph Varnum of Massachusetts confessed that he did not know anything about the public buildings, how big they were, or how expensive. Although he did not feel inclined to support the measure he would not vote on something unless he knew more about the subject.

Long speeches, sometimes reasoned, sometimes humorous, but more often tedious, filled the hall of the House during the debates on the loan guarantee that took place during the last week of February 1796. On the 25th, a congressman from the Maine district of Massachusetts, Henry Dearborn, introduced a resolution to inquire whether any alterations should be made to the plans of the public buildings.⁸⁸ This simple question caught the friends of the city off guard because few knew anything specific about what was being built in the federal city. They did not know what the Capitol was supposed to look like or how big the President's House was going to be. He was not sure but Dearborn thought the President's House was prob-

ably too big and suggested converting it into the Capitol. Crabb replied that if the President's House was too big it should be torn down and a smaller residence put in its place. John Swanwick of Pennsylvania, one of the few members who had actually visited the federal city, said that the plans for the Capitol had been changed so many times that it would not hurt to change them again. According to another congressman, rumors about the extravagance of the federal buildings were hurting the prospect for the loan guarantee. In reply, Theodore Sedgwick of Massachusetts made a few farsighted remarks that could have been scripted by Washington himself. He said: "The better the buildings are the more honor it will be to those who erected them, and to those who occupy them."⁸⁹ Dearborn's resolution passed the House, forty-two to thirty-eight, and Smith's committee was instructed to examine the question.

On March 11, 1796, Smith reported that his committee could find nothing to suggest for alterations to the Capitol or the President's House. Included in his report was White's description of the progress made on the Capitol so far:

The foundation of the Capitol is laid; the foundation wall under ground and above is of different thickness, and is computed to average fourteen feet high and nine feet thick. The freestone work is commenced on the north wing; it is of different heights, but may average three feet and a half; the interior walls are carried up the same height. The estimate to finish the north wing is . . . \$75,141. . . .

A. White has no estimate of the remainder of the building, but would observe, that as the south wing is to be occupied by one large room only, the expense must be much less than that of the north wing, which is considered as sufficient to accommodate both Houses of Congress during the present state of representation. The main body, too, will be finished in the same way; and the grand vestibule may or may not be covered with a dome; architects differ in opinion with regard to covering it. If it should not be covered, it will consist only of an arcade, twenty feet high and ten feet wide; and over that a colonnade sixteen feet high, affording a communication from the grand staircase to all other parts of the building. Upon the whole, A. White thinks he goes beyond the necessary sum, when he estimates \$400,000 for finishing the whole building.⁹⁰

From White's remarks, it is clear that the design of the central section was still undecided.

Apparently, the commissioners still considered Hallet's courtyard scheme a viable alternative to Dr. Thornton's rotunda vestibule.

Further debate on the congressional loan guarantee took up much of the members' time on March 31, 1796. It was a day of long speeches that, not surprisingly, included a discussion about staying in Philadelphia. But by the end of the day, the friends of the federal city and the administration prevailed. The loan guarantee (reduced to \$300,000) was approved by the House in a lopsided vote, seventy-two to twenty-one. The Senate passed the legislation on May 4 and the president signed it two days later. The Capitol and President's House could now proceed, and work on plans for two office buildings for cabinet departments could be made as well.

HADFIELD DISMISSED

While the city's financial future was looking up, the 1796 building season was beset by labor problems. The cost of living made it difficult for carpenters to make ends meet, and the expense of repairing and sharpening their tools made matters worse. They asked for an increase in wages. Building temporary lodgings was suggested as a means to stop the extraction of high rents from workmen, who told the commissioners that "some indulgence is necessary to live in this expensive place."⁹¹ Labor problems worsened when Hadfield handed in his resignation on June 24, 1796, giving three months notice as required by his contract. Admittedly, there was little respect among the commissioners for the young architect, and his opinion of them was equally low. Yet they needed someone to direct work at the Capitol and no replacement was readily available. They were, therefore, relieved when he reconsidered and withdrew his notice a few days after it had been given.⁹² What prompted Hadfield's change of heart is unknown, but his relationship to the board was not improved by his resignation threat.

In the summer of 1796, carpenters were engaged in cutting and preparing the wooden joists, flooring, and rafters that would be installed once the masonry work was further along and dry. They also erected the scaffolds used by the masons

building the brick and stone walls. Over the course of the 1796 building season (which lasted from mid-May to mid-November) the brick exterior walls and sandstone facing were carried up to the bottom of the second floor windows. Interior brick walls reached the same height. Most of the stonework was done by cutters, who transformed the rough blocks into precisely dimensioned, plain, squared stone called ashlar. Each stone was destined for a specific place on the walls as determined by the architect. In October idle masons waited for stone intended for the plinths under the exterior pilasters. Slow delivery meant the work was at a standstill for a while, but the delay was not serious.

As winter set in, the commissioners ordered supplies for the next season. One million bricks and 6,000 bushels of lime necessary to make mortar were purchased for the walls of the Capitol and the President's House. Brick kilns were erected on Capitol Hill, where workmen extracted clay from nearby pits. Other brick contractors, such as Bennett Fenwick, delivered brick fired elsewhere. Unhappy with the general quality of brick, Hadfield asked the commissioners if a better sort could be purchased for the arcade of the Senate chamber, but he cautiously added that the decision was entirely theirs to make. To feed laborers and slaves, 150 barrels of pork, forty barrels of beef, and 1,500 barrels of Indian meal were also ordered.

At the close of Washington's second term, he urged the commissioners to concentrate all their resources on the Capitol. More than anything in the city, that building would inspire public confidence in the Potomac capital. If it were not ready in time, the whole enterprise would be seen as a failure. On January 29, 1797, he wrote:

I persuade myself that great exertions will be used to forward the Capitol in preference to any object—All others indeed depend, in a high degree, thereon, and are or ought to be subordinate thereto.—As such therefore with a view to remove those unhappy jealousies (which have had a baneful influence on the affairs of that City) as to invigorate the operations on that building . . . there are many who intermix doubts with anxiety, lest the principal building should not be in a situation to accommodate Congress by the epoch of their removal.⁹³

Lack of money was still the city's most vexing problem. To the board's chagrin, Congress's loan

guarantee did not easily attract lenders. Indeed, finding a source from which to borrow took well over a year. Especially disappointing were “Dutch Capitalists,” who were the commissioners’ first hope to grace the city with cash. While they explored other avenues, Washington’s instructions to push the Capitol meant that work on the President’s House would be curtailed and the executive offices postponed.

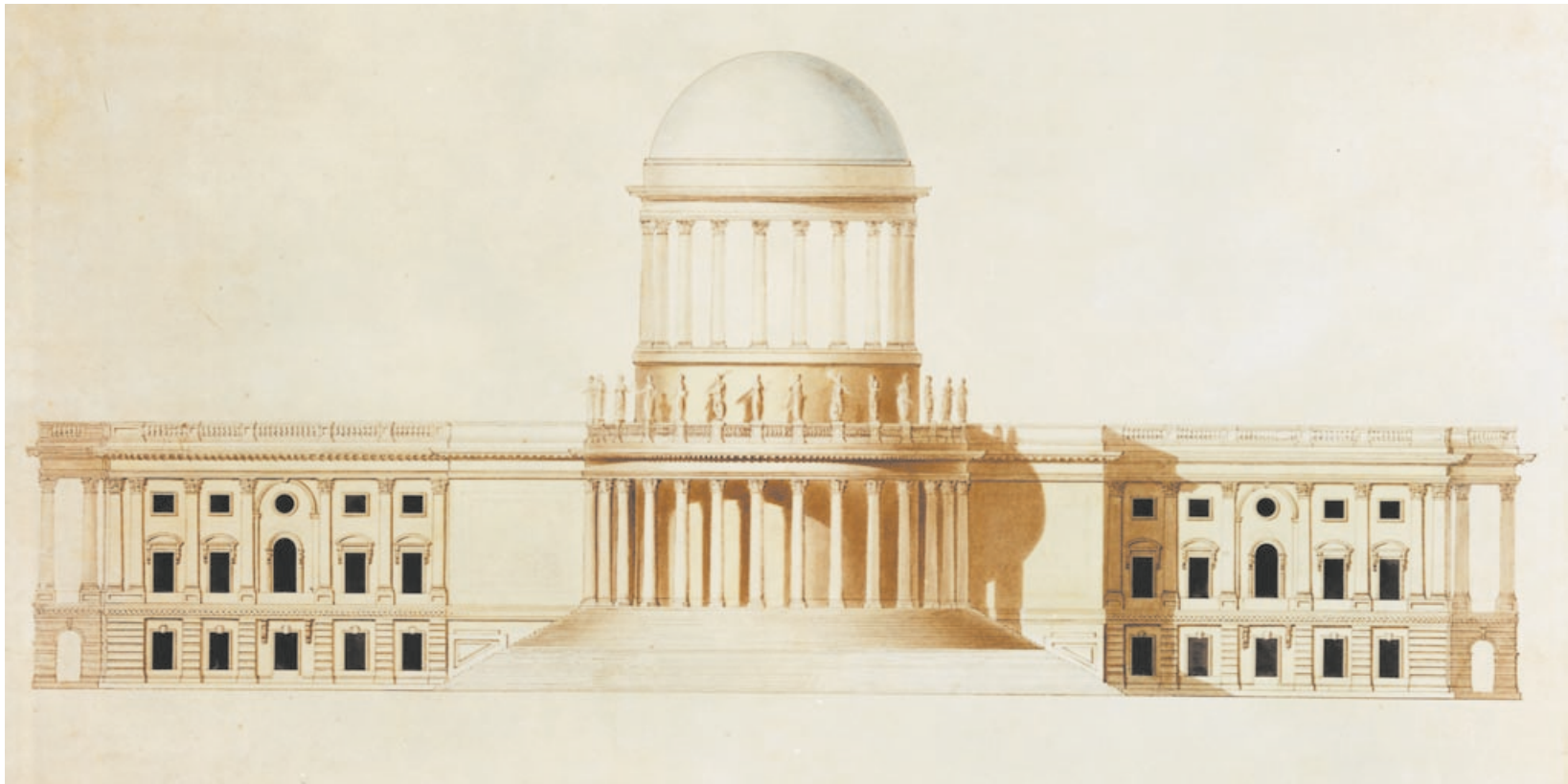
On March 24, 1797, the commissioners hired Allen Wiley to lay brick at the Capitol. He was paid seventeen shillings (\$2.26) for every thousand bricks laid in straight walls, six pence (\$0.07) more for curving walls. Arches were turned for eleven shillings, three pence (\$1.50) each. In July, a contract for additional brick was made with Middleton Belt, who agreed to deliver 200,000 hard bricks to the Capitol. Bennet Fenwick’s brick contract was renewed. To build the north wing, more than 100,000 bricks were needed to raise the walls three feet. By the end of the season, Wiley raised the walls thirty-five feet more, reaching the level of the roof. The sandstone facing was up to the tops of the pilaster capitals, fifty-seven feet above the foundations. After four years of construction, one wing of the Capitol began to resemble its intended appearance.

On the inside, carpenters laid almost all of the rough flooring and were preparing the roof trusses that would be put in place before the spring of 1798. Once under roof, the interior finishes could begin. As winter approached, carpenters were told not to throw away their “chips,” which would be distributed between the laborers and slaves for firewood. Hadfield was responsible for the structural design of the roof, a complex series of flat and sloping surfaces that was kept as low as possible. He pledged in writing that the roof would not exceed the height of the balustrade.⁹⁴ (During this period steep roofs were considered old-fashioned, reminiscent of the days when thatch was used as a roofing material.) Eighty thousand wooden shingles were on hand to cover the roof, but the commissioners had come to think that slate might be used instead. On June 8, 1797, they asked Graham Haskins to sell the shingles at a price reflecting their high quality. The sale, however, was canceled and shingles were used to cover the roof. Once in place, they were protected with a coating of paint and sand, a precaution against rot and fire.

Construction details were routinely discussed at the commissioners’ weekly meetings. On June 20, 1797, Dr. Thornton brought up the subject of warming the Senate gallery with stoves. Providing for the comfort of visitors was not important to his fellow commissioners and the proposal was overruled. After all, the Senate had only opened its doors to visitors in 1795 and might close them again at any time. In another matter, Thornton noticed sections of the exterior cornice had modillions that were too far apart. He blamed the mistake on Hatfield’s inattention and asked his colleagues to order the blunder corrected.⁹⁵ When they refused, Thornton deplored their decision, and claimed that the cornice would “remain forever a laughing-Stock to architects.”⁹⁶ Apparently Scott and White did not believe the mistake was serious enough to justify the cost to fix it.

More than a year had gone by since Congress passed the loan guarantee, but the city’s coffers were still empty. At about the time that lenders in Amsterdam refused to cooperate, the commissioners were turned away by the Bank of the United States. Annapolis was the next place they looked. On November 25, 1797, the board dispatched Gustavus Scott to lobby the Maryland legislature for a loan. There, despite some opposition from the Baltimore interests, Scott was ultimately successful in securing a loan for \$100,000. However, because it was paid in United States debt certificates, which were selling below face value, Maryland’s loan actually translated into about \$84,000 for the city.

Disappointed by the lack of cash generated by the loan guarantee, the commissioners again petitioned Congress for relief. In February 1798, Alexander White returned to Philadelphia with a second memorial from the board, this one asking for an annual appropriation to finish the public buildings. A total of \$200,000 was needed over the next three years: \$120,000 for the north wing of the Capitol and the President’s House, and the rest for two office buildings to house cabinet departments. The House of Representatives appointed a committee to study the memorial and asked White to describe the accommodations provided in the Capitol. White enumerated the rooms and lobbies in the north wing, giving dimensions, and reported that the stone and brick work was nearly complete along with the rough flooring. The commissioners needed about \$46,000 to finish the wing. White also briefly



West Front

by Dr. William Thornton, ca. 1797

Library of Congress

About 1797, Thornton proposed covering the conference room with a temple consisting of a dome carried on columns. Another colonnade in front of the conference room carried an entablature and balustrade with allegorical statuary. Faint markings indicate that bas-reliefs were planned to decorate the walls flanking the portico. Without indications of doors or windows, the semicircular projection of the conference room was a vast blank wall.

described sections of the Capitol that had been postponed for lack of funds. In contrast to their memorial written two years earlier, the commissioners now decided that a dome should be placed over the grand vestibule, a decision that rejected Hallet's courtyard proposal. In addition, a second dome over the conference room, carried on columns in the form of a circular temple, was described for the first time. Affecting only the area between the wings, the double dome plan was drawn in ca.1797 by Dr. Thornton as his contribution to the Capitol's floor plan. (See Plan D, page 39.)

When the commissioners sent their memorial to Philadelphia, they were not prepared for the reckless ideas that it would inspire in economy-

minded congressmen and senators. Few members of Congress had visited the federal city and fewer still knew anything about the plans for the public buildings. However, unfamiliarity with the city did not stop them from making proposals that would have altered the essential character of the nation's capital forever. Proposals that were floating through Congress included one to house the president on Capitol Hill, another to convert the President's House into the Supreme Court building or the Capitol, and a third to put cabinet departments in the south wing of the Capitol. In White's opinion, the proposals were motivated by notions of economy and expediency. Alarmed, the commissioners replied with the hope that their friends would defeat these schemes because changes would "shake public confidence to its centre."⁹⁷ The plans had been approved by George Washington, the original proprietors had given their lands based on the approved plans, and investors had purchased property on the premise that the plans were fixed and unalterable.

While Congress discussed the appropriation to assist the federal city, the commissioners hoped that nothing would come of the proposals to change

the plans or locations of the public buildings. The House passed the appropriation, but amendments were attached in the Senate changing the appropriation to a loan and reducing the amount of assistance to \$100,000. Fearing it was this or nothing, the House accepted the amended legislation on April 13 and President Adams approved it five days later. The commissioners immediately asked the secretary of the treasury for instructions on collecting their loan.

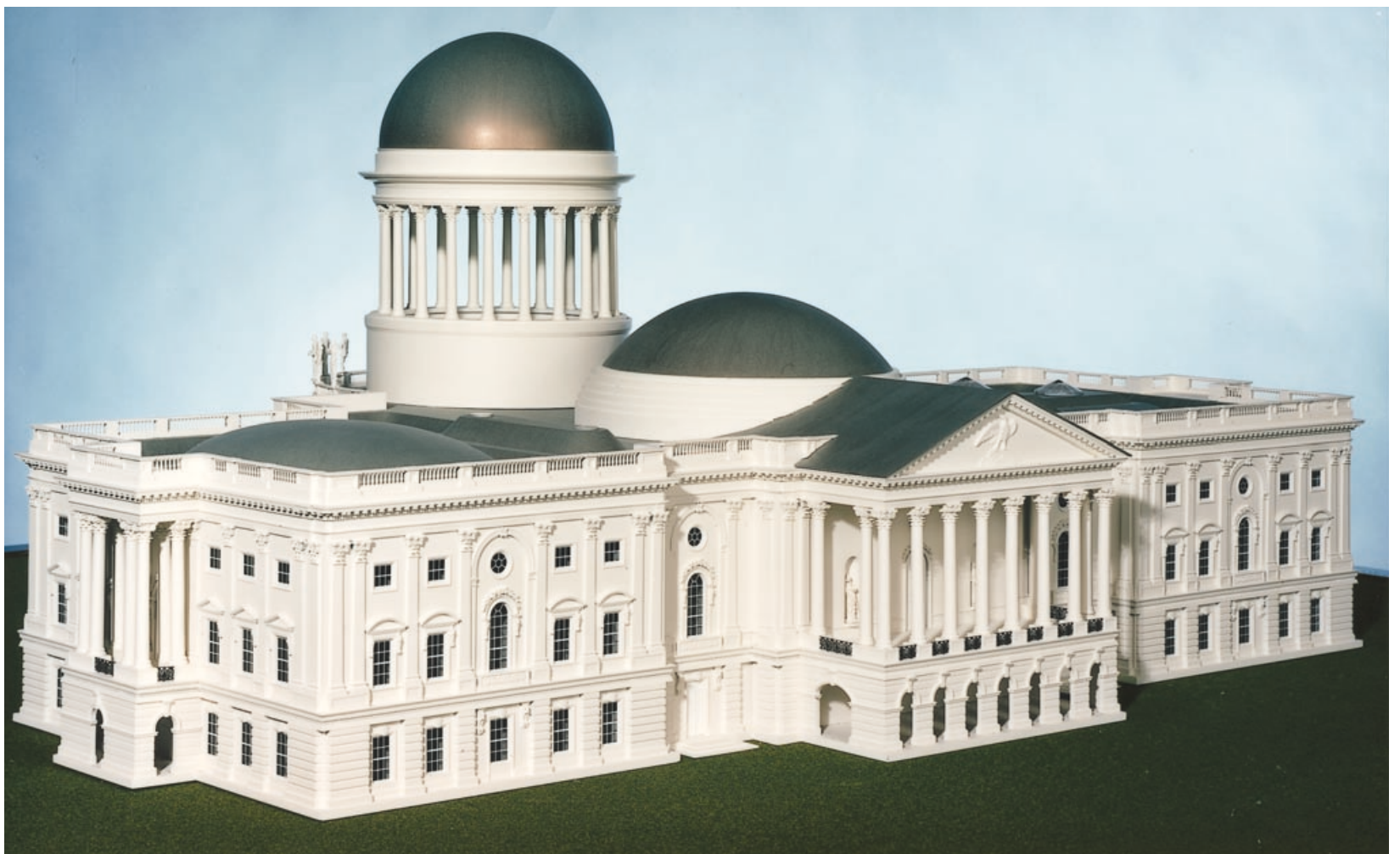
Meanwhile, when White was in Philadelphia, his colleagues had been making arrangements for the Capitol's doors and windows. Once the building was closed in, workmen could begin the interior finish. For the exterior doors, the commissioners selected mahogany; clear pine was ordered for interior doors, which could later be painted to imitate a more expensive wood. For window sash, Hadfield drew designs and the board asked several carpenters to make samples. They then ordered Hadfield

and a local builder, William Lovering, to report on the relative merits of each. Both liked Clotworthy Stephenson's sash, calling it an example of excellent workmanship. The commissioners initially decided the sash would be made of mahogany but soon changed their minds and ordered walnut used as well. The strength of mahogany was necessary for the large windows of the first and second floors, but walnut was probably considered adequate for the smaller third floor windows.

Hadfield's roof design drew criticism from the foreman of carpenters, Redmont Purcell. On February 20, 1798, Purcell wrote the commissioners to

Model of the Thornton Design of 1797

This modern model illustrates the design of the Capitol as it was in 1797 when a stilted dome was designed to cover the conference room. A low dome fronted by a portico was the central feature of the east front. (1994 photograph.)



condemn the gutters, bracing, and connections of the roof framing to the ceiling joists. Hadfield defended his design and the commissioners, suspecting Purcell of unnecessary trouble making, absolved the architect of neglect. The board was more concerned with Hadfield's progress on designs for the cabinet offices, a pair of buildings flanking the President's House. The executive offices were conceived as detached wings in harmony with the President's House, yet simpler, smaller, and plainer. Hadfield's design for these two-story rectangular structures with Ionic entrance porticoes was approved by the commissioners, who were anxious to put the project out for bid. Like any architect, Hadfield was eager to see his design built, yet wished to oversee the work himself. On the same day the commissioners gave final approval to Hadfield's roof design, they asked him to return his drawings for the executive offices. Hadfield refused until his official relationship with the buildings was explained to his satisfaction. The board did not believe further explanation was necessary, thought the architect would "have all the honor flowing from a full appropriation of it," and considered the plans as belonging to the United States and not the architect's personal property, as he now claimed.⁹⁸ This dispute was quickly settled. On May 18, 1798, the commissioners gave Hadfield three months notice, saying: "Your conduct of late has rendered it proper that your occupation as Superintendent at the Capitol should cease as soon as the time for previous notice, required by your contract shall have expired."⁹⁹ The president was informed of the board's action dismissing "a young man of taste" who regrettably was also "deficient in practical knowledge of architecture."¹⁰⁰ While his dismissal was not directly related to the Capitol, Hadfield joined a growing fraternity of architects whose careers were derailed or wrecked by their work in the federal city.

HOBAN'S DOUBLE-DUTY

*I*mmediately upon Hadfield's dismissal, the commissioners put Hoban in charge of the Capitol's day-to-day operations. In theory, both Hallet and Hadfield had worked under Hoban's direction, but he had spent

his time mainly at the President's House. He was now directly responsible for both buildings, and finishing the north wing of the Capitol became top priority. In spite of his expanded workload, Hoban still found time to bid as a private contractor on the Treasury Building, one of the two executive offices designed by Hadfield. While he lost the job to Leonard Harbaugh, Hoban was paid extra to supervise that work. Ambitious and energetic, Hoban was the best hope that the federal buildings would be ready in 1800.

During the first three months of Hoban's control of the Capitol, Hadfield was still employed there. On May 18, 1798, the day he was fired, he made his last report on the building's progress. He stated that the exterior stonework was up to the frieze and only the cornice and balustrade were needed. The rough flooring was in place throughout the interior, except in the large room above the Senate chamber. Most of the roof was in place and all the shingles were ready to install. Once the roof was finished, the "carcase" of the building would be ready for interior finishing.¹⁰¹

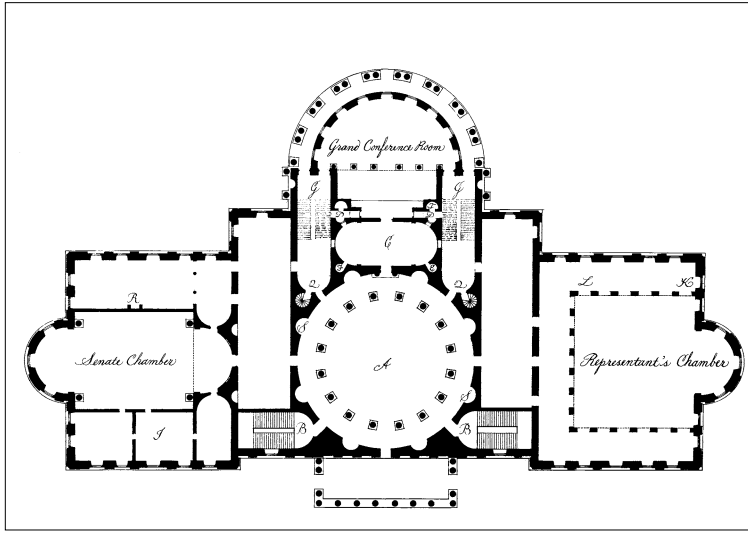
On August 15, the commissioners wrote the firm of Rhodes & McGregor in New York City, asking if it could supply the public buildings with window glass. Two months later, an Albany firm was asked to give the cost of 656 panes of glass in three graduated sizes. In addition, the board wanted four cribs of glass for circular and semicircular sash and several cribs for skylights. In 1799, they ordered 560 square feet of glass from Isaac Harvey in Philadelphia for the skylight above the elliptical stair hall. These orders required many months to fill and, due to the brittle, fragile nature of glass, caused the commissioners considerable trouble.

By the end of the 1798 building season, Hoban reported that the roof was finished and the gutters were in place and coated with lead.¹⁰² The brickwork was complete and all the sandstone was in place on the north, east, and west walls. Still missing was a small section of the balustrade. Bridging, ceiling, and flooring joists were all made and, for the most part, installed. More than 50,000 feet of northern clear pine, one to two inches thick, was on hand for floors and interior trim. There remained nearly 500 tons of stone, 30,000 bricks, and 40,000 shingles on hand that were not needed—an inventory that represents some dramatic miscalculations.

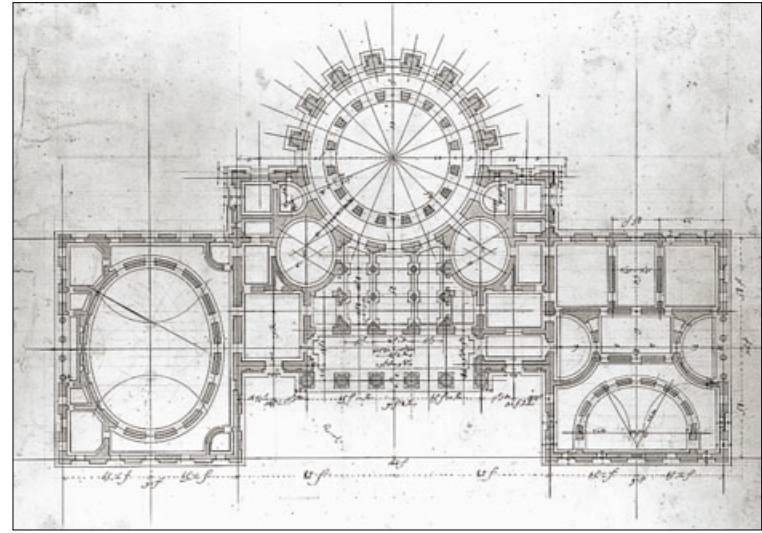
Evolution of the Capitol's Early Floor Plan

Thornton's original plan for the Capitol (A) consisted of wings for the House and Senate connected by a central building with a rotunda, a windowless presidential office, and a conference room. After Washington approved the plan, however, problems with its staircases, windows, and columns were identified. To overcome these faults, Stephen Hallet offered a substitute plan, which became known as the "conference plan" (B). In this plan an elliptical House chamber was the principal feature of the south wing. The Senate was accommodated in the eastern half of the north wing along with committee rooms and lobbies. The plan of the wings was approved, but the center section was disapproved because of the recessed portico and the absence of a rotunda. After construction began on the wings, Hallet devised a new plan for the center building bringing the portico forward but still leaving out the rotunda (C). When he began laying foundations for the central section without approval, he was promptly dismissed.

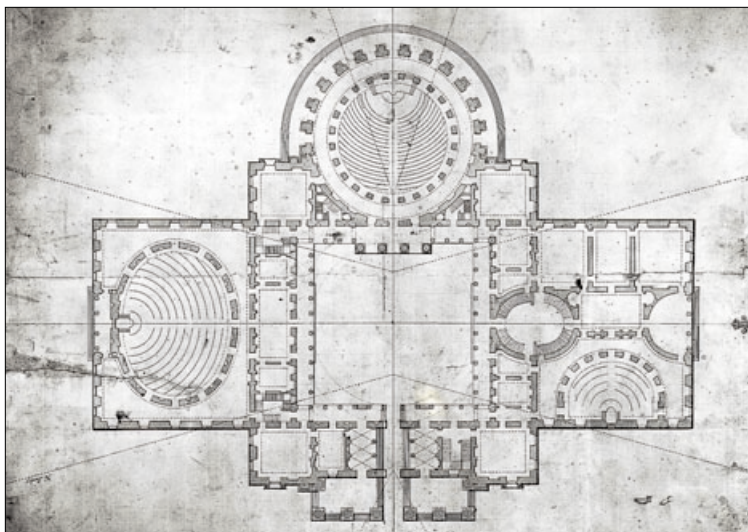
About 1797, Thornton adapted Hallet's plan of the wings to a revised plan of the center building (D), restoring its three major features: portico, rotunda, and conference room. More revisions to the Capitol's floor plan awaited in the near future.



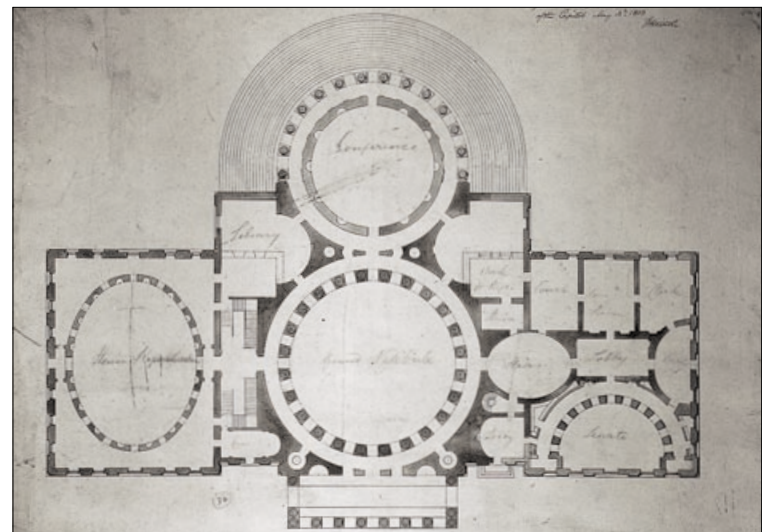
A) Conjectural Reconstruction of William Thornton's Original Plan, 1793 (second story), by Don Alexander Hawkins, 1984
Reproduced by permission



B) Conference Plan (ground story), by Stephen Hallet, 1793
Library of Congress



C) Courtyard Plan (ground story), by Stephen Hallet, ca. 1794
Library of Congress



D) Plan (ground story), by William Thornton, ca. 1797
Library of Congress

Plastering was the most important task undertaken in the next building season. In November 1798, the commissioners ordered 60,000 sections of wooden lath four feet long and “thicker than usual.” Delivery was expected the following May. To help bind the plaster, 1,000 bushels of hair were ordered from a Boston merchant, costing the federal city \$279. Archibald Campbell was asked to find workmen to trowel 10,000 square yards of plaster, for which the commissioners offered to pay three cents a yard.¹⁰³ They also needed mechanics to run plaster of Paris cornices and ornamental work in the “handsomest style.”¹⁰⁴

The plastering contract went to John Kearney of Baltimore, who began work in the third week of April 1799. Twenty tons of plaster of Paris was ordered by the commissioners, who did not care if it was foreign or domestic as long as it was a good white or blue color.¹⁰⁵ By the middle of May, Kearney had scaffolds up in three committee rooms on the first floor and his crew was at work boiling vats of plaster. In June, hot weather aggravated the misery of the work and the commissioners allowed laborers a half pint of whiskey a day to help them cope. Most of the plaster was applied directly to bare brick walls or to laths nailed to ceiling joists. Hoban probably consulted with Kearney when he designed the cornices, which were an important part of the Capitol’s interior decoration. The two vestibules, four committee rooms, and Senate chamber on the first floor had cornices with molded ornaments, while the large library room and its lobby on the second floor had cove cornices. Because the library would be used by the House of Representatives as a temporary chamber, Hoban added a row of dentils to give it a higher finish. Four rooms for clerks apparently had no cornices at all.

About the time the plastering began, Hoban wrote the commissioners asking for drawings of the staircases, Senate chamber, and library. He said that he had no idea about the trim or finish for these rooms, but if necessary would devise them himself. Scott and White forwarded Hoban’s letter to Thornton, inquiring if he intended to make any drawings. They recalled that the 1792 competition advertisement required sections of the building and they were needed now. In reply Thornton explained that he expected the superintendent to supply drawings for the board’s approval: because he was always available to give advice and ideas,

he did not see why he should be bothered making drawings. He explained some of his thoughts about the interior in the letter to show how a verbal description could be substituted for an illustrated one. He wanted the columns in the Senate chamber to be marble, but since that was beyond the city’s means, he thought scagliola or porphyry should be used instead. The entablature should be “full but plain & without modillions” and painted white. The walls should be painted a “very pale blue in fresco or in distemper [i.e., tempera].” Two flights of elegant marble stairs were needed in the elliptical hall, but wood could be substituted for the time being. Private staircases had to be narrow enough to allow light from the skylights to penetrate three stories through the wells. He concluded by reiterating his belief that drawing was Hoban’s duty.¹⁰⁶ It was obvious that Thornton found architectural drafting laborious and difficult, and he was never asked for drawings again.

As the plastering was going forward, the first shipment of glass arrived. On August 1, Robert King from the surveyor’s department examined the glass and reported that it appeared to be “Newcastle crown, of the Quality of Seconds.”¹⁰⁷ The glass had been packed poorly, was too weak for the size of panes required, and was too crooked to be of any use. Dissatisfied, the commissioners refused to pay the \$1,700 charge. Another order was placed for crown glass from London, at least a quarter inch thick and securely packed. Until the glass arrived, the window sash could not be installed. Workmen boarded up the openings to keep warm during the winter and sat idly in the dark. To overcome this problem, Hoban suggested making a temporary window sash glazed with small, cheap panes of American glass. Later, when the permanent sash was installed, the temporary ones could be sold for residential use.

At the close of the 1799 building season, the north wing was almost complete. The exterior was finished, lightning rods installed, cisterns and cesspools leaded, and the roof painted and sanded. On the interior, some of the plastering was incomplete but work on the important rooms was almost done. Sixteen Ionic columns in the Senate chamber were in place, standing on a brick arcade that was sheathed with wood paneling. The shafts were made of wood skimmed with plaster, and the capitals were plaster as well. The columns were in the

“ancient Ionic order but with Volutes like the modern Ionic.”¹⁰⁸ Thus, the volutes were set at a forty-five-degree angle and probably looked like smaller versions of the Ionic order Hoban used at the President’s House. Windows in the Senate chamber and elsewhere were trimmed with backs, elbows, soffits, and architraves. Double-hung sash were held with rope on brass pulleys and counterweights. Doorways were similarly finished with paneled jambs and molded architraves. Other woodwork was limited to chair rails, baseboards, and mantels. Each hearth was laid with three pieces of sandstone. In the event marble mantles and hearths were installed in the future, the sandstone could be reused to pave the city’s footpaths. All in all, the original interior of the north wing was simple and straightforward, lacking the elaborate materials and designs that were beyond the city’s means.

“A RESIDENCE NOT TO BE CHANGED”

The year 1800 opened with the commissioners finishing up last minute details. Hardware was still needed for the doors in the Capitol and the interior woodwork needed another coat of paint. In the spring Kearney’s men resumed the plastering that had been stopped by the first frost in November. A particularly violent storm damaged the roof and gutters and caused some of the new plaster to fall. John Emory was ordered to repair the gutters, and when his work failed to stop leaks, the commissioners threatened him with a lawsuit.

In a bill signed by President Adams on April 24, 1800, the government prepared for its move to the new capital.¹⁰⁹ An appropriation of \$9,000 was made to furnish the Capitol and to transport the books, papers, and records belonging to the House of Representatives and the Senate. To ease travel between the Capitol and the President’s House, Congress lent the commissioners \$10,000 to pave sidewalks along Pennsylvania Avenue. While in Philadelphia, the Library Company extended Congress the free use of its holdings, but no comparable facility existed in the new city. The void was filled with an initial \$5,000 appropriation to buy books for the use of Congress in its new home. Thus, the Library of

Congress, the modern world’s largest library, was quietly established in Washington.

Thomas Jefferson’s direct influence on the affairs of the capital city ended when he left Washington’s cabinet at the end of 1793. But now, as vice president and the Senate’s presiding officer, his concern with order and decorum prompted him to advise Dr. Thornton on the proper arrangement of the new chamber. He suggested placing the vice president’s chair and platform several feet from the wall. This would allow senators to pass behind the presiding officer as they crossed back and forth across the room. In Philadelphia, Jefferson complained, he sat against the wall and senators were continually walking in front of him. He also thought senators should sit at two rows of curving tables: three rows were too many. The space behind the back row should have a balustrade creating a space sufficiently wide to allow a person to pass but not so wide as to allow members to pace back and forth. He also suggested a private room for the Speaker, a suggestion that came too late to implement.¹¹⁰

On May 15, 1800, President Adams asked department heads to arrange for the removal of government to the new capital and directed them to be ready to leave in a month. When employees began arriving in the federal city that summer, last-minute work was still going on at the Capitol. Since Congress was not due until November, a little time remained to tie up loose ends. In August, Kearney finally finished the plastering, or as much as would be finished—the clerks’ room above the Senate chamber was never plastered. Mortise locks were still needed and the commissioners were waiting for seventy boxes of window glass to arrive from Boston. William Rush, the Philadelphia sculptor, was asked to carve a wooden eagle that the commissioners hoped would cost no more than forty dollars. They took care of one last detail a month before Congress arrived: a wooden privy was built near the Capitol. It was seventy feet long, eight feet wide, and thirteen feet high, and cost \$234.

The second session of the Sixth Congress convened in the north wing of the unfinished Capitol on November 17, 1800. For some, leaving Philadelphia was a bitter pill to swallow, but the sickly conditions in that city over the previous summers made it seem wise to relocate. Friends of the federal city extolled its healthful environment, noting the absence of yellow fever and cholera that plagued

more heavily populated places. (In a particularly dreadful outbreak in 1793, Philadelphia lost 10 percent of its population to yellow fever.) A sense of homage to the memory of George Washington, dead less than a year, also helped smooth the way to the Potomac. President Adams addressed Congress in the Senate chamber on November 22, congratulating it “on the prospect of a residence not to

be changed.” He acknowledged the cramped conditions in the Capitol and city, noting that their accommodations were not as complete as might be wished, but he thought things would improve quickly. The president then offered an eloquent prayer for the future of the nation’s new capital:

May this Territory be the residence of virtue and happiness! In this city may that piety and virtue, that wisdom and magnanimity, that constancy and self-government which adorned the great character whose name it bears, be forever held in veneration! Here, and throughout our country, may simple manners, pure morals, and true religion, flourish forever!¹¹

The government’s removal to the new capital city was one of the most spectacular accomplishments of George Washington’s accomplished career. His singular determination overcame many

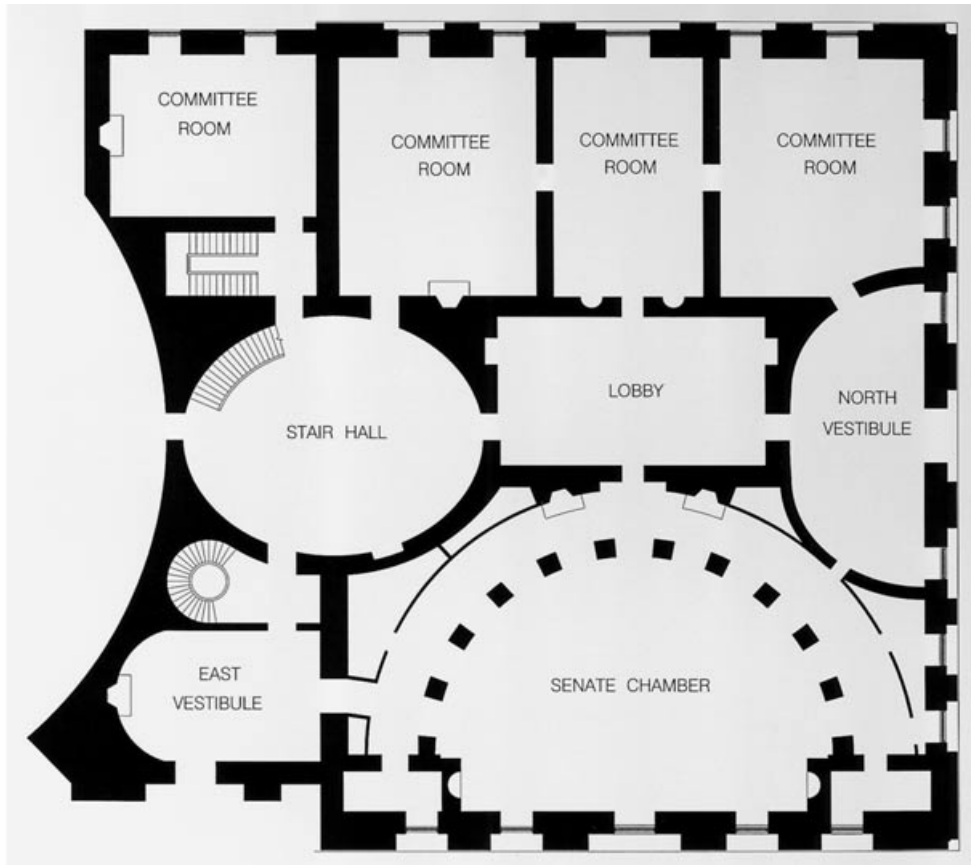
Watercolor View of the Capitol

by William Birch, ca. 1800

Library of Congress

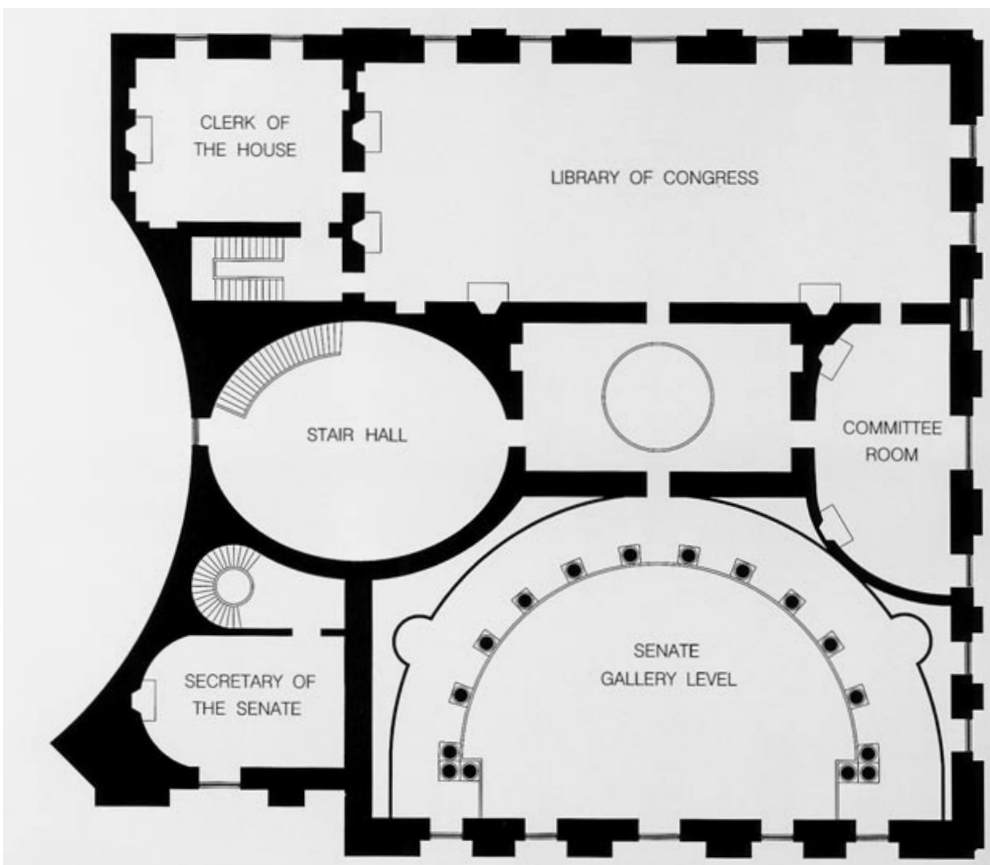
*T*his charming depiction of the Capitol was drawn about the time the federal government moved from Philadelphia. Although the outside masonry had been complete for some time, Birch drew a stone cutter and carver hard at work in the foreground. Another instance of artistic license can be seen in the oak branches over the arched windows, decorative items appearing in Thornton’s elevation but never carried out.





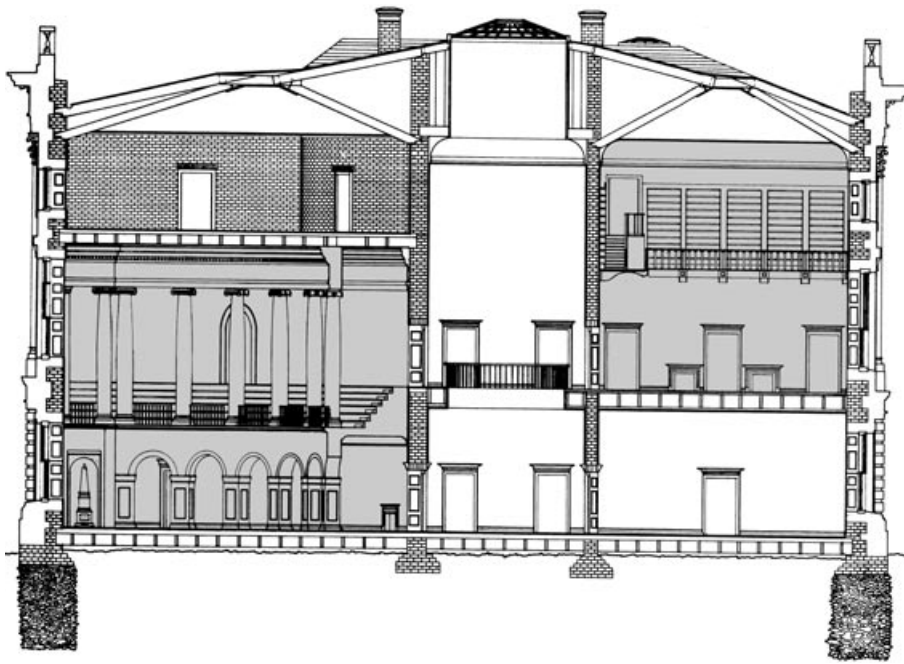
**First Floor Plan of the North Wing
As Completed in 1800**
Conjectural Reconstruction, 1997

*T*his reconstruction of the north wing's floor plan was based on measured drawings made in 1806 by B. Henry Latrobe. A notable feature is the thin wooden wall in the Senate chamber, which transformed the oddly shaped room into a graceful semicircle. This improvement was suggested by either George Hadfield or James Hoban.



**Second Floor Plan of North Wing
As Completed in 1800**
Conjectural Reconstruction, 1997

*T*he principal floor of the north wing was occupied by the Senate gallery and the library room, where the House, the Senate, and the Supreme Court held their sessions on different occasions. Throughout the plan are indications of false doors, placed for reasons of balance and symmetry. In the office of the clerk of the House, for instance, there were twice as many false doors as real doors.



Section of the North Wing Looking South, ca. 1800
Conjectural Reconstruction, 1989

The Senate chamber (left) and the Library of Congress (right) were both two-story rooms, but the floor of the Senate was originally at ground level while the floor of the library was on the main story. Designs for raising the Senate chamber to the principal story were drawn in President Jefferson's second term.

obstacles blocking the path to the Potomac and, though he was helped along the way, it was his vision that gave the United States its unique capital city.

THE BOARD'S DEMISE

*W*hen President Adams welcomed Congress to the Capitol, Vice President Jefferson was en route to Washington. His empty chair sat below a tall window with a semicircular top, the largest of the six windows in the new Senate chamber. The galleries were full of spectators, including Dr. Thornton and his wife, Maria, who noted in her diary that a pair of magnificent portraits of the ill-fated King and Queen of France, Louis XVI and Marie Antoinette, were hanging in the chamber. These portraits, given to Congress by the government of France in 1784, were part of the public property moved from

Philadelphia to Washington that summer. (During the Revolutionary War, Congress asked the King of France for these portraits so that “the representatives of these States may daily have before their eyes, the first royal friends and patrons of their cause.” They also congratulated the King on the birth of his first child and asked for more money to fight the “common enemy.”¹¹²)

Hanging in Washington sixteen years later, the portraits were now sad reminders of the bloody excesses of the French Revolution and America's strained relations with its former ally. Despite these associations, the paintings and their golden frames were wondrously luminous and rich, imparting a rococo splendor unusual in an American public building. One blemish, however, appeared on the portrait of the queen. It was damaged by a Dutch woman who, while touring Federal Hall in New York City, poked her finger through the canvass while examining the material used to make Marie Antoinette's petticoat.¹¹³

On Christmas day 1800, Commissioner Gustavus Scott died. To fill his seat on the board President Adams first appointed his wife's nephew, William Cranch, but he resigned two months later when he was promoted to the bench of the District of Columbia's courts. Tristram Dalton, a former senator from Massachusetts, was named to replace Cranch. While Cranch and Dalton were both New Englanders, they also had financial ties to the federal city. Both were investors in Tobias Lear's merchant company, which handled goods throughout the Potomac region. Through Lear, they had ties to the Potowmack Company, as had most of the previous commissioners.

Dalton's appointment, made on the last day of Adams' term, was one of the so-called “midnight appointments” that so infuriated the supporters of his successor, Thomas Jefferson. “The Revolution of 1800,” as Jefferson's presidential election was sometimes called, had not been easily won and Jeffersonian Republicans were eager to turn out Adams' loyalists and replace them with members of their party. The “midnight appointments” denied Jefferson the opportunity to fill many offices with his own men. Jefferson's election was a hotly contested affair that was decided in the House of Representatives over a seven-day period in February 1801. Meeting in the library room on the second floor, members of the House wrestled with the

deadlocked contest between Jefferson and Aaron Burr. Although Burr stood for vice president, he received the same number of votes for president as Jefferson in the Electoral College and he refused to concede. The tie vote threw the election into the House of Representatives. Thirty-six ballots were cast during the contest, with each state delegation casting one vote. After a seven-day impasse, Jefferson finally carried ten states to Burr's four. Two states cast blank ballots. Alexander Hamilton convinced moderate Federalists to abstain or vote for Jefferson as the lesser of two evils. Once again, as in his role in the passage of the Residence Act, Hamilton came to Jefferson's aid at a crucial moment. The election was the Capitol's first great political drama, one that led to a constitutional amendment providing separate votes in the Electoral College for president and vice president.

On the morning of Jefferson's inauguration, March 4, 1801, President Adams and his wife left the city at daybreak without staying for the swearing in ceremony. At noon, Jefferson walked from his boarding house to the Capitol, entered the Senate chamber on the ground floor, and took the oath of office. He delivered a conciliatory address in which he declared:

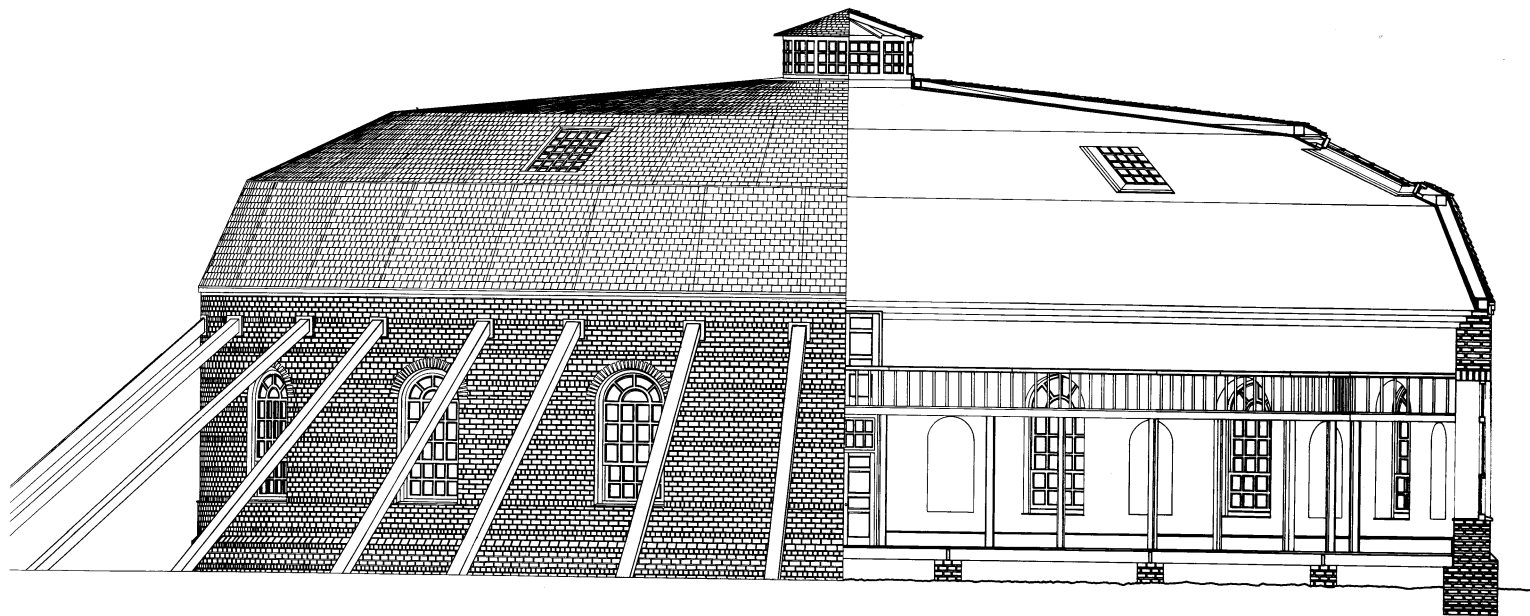
We are all Republicans, we are all Federalists. If there be any among us who would wish to dissolve this Union or change its republican form, let them stand undisturbed as monuments of the safety with which error of opinion may be tolerated where reason is left free to combat it.¹¹⁴

Although Jefferson was not a good orator, he was capable of writing and delivering a great speech. After listening to it, members of the House of Representatives returned upstairs to their chamber to write letters and clean out their desks. The Sixth Congress ended the day before and the first session of the next Congress would convene in December. The representatives met in the library, a room eighty-six feet long, thirty-five feet wide, and thirty-six feet high. It was heated by four fireplaces and a stove. The stove was apparently placed too close to the wall, because on January 30, 1801, the commissioners asked Hoban to remove the baseboard, chair rail, and window trim behind it as a precaution against fire. Public galleries were provided, but their extent is unknown. The absence of supporting columns suggests that they were carried on wall brackets and were there-

fore quite shallow. The Speaker's chair was placed in front of the large arched window in the center of the west wall, one of eight windows that must have been hung with draperies or blinds to control the afternoon sun. Four additional windows were located at the north end of the room. By far the largest space in the north wing, the temporary House chamber comfortably accommodated the 106 members of the Sixth and Seventh Congresses. But with the results of the 1800 census promising an increased membership in the House, future Congresses would require more room.

On May 27, 1801, the board of commissioners asked Hoban to design a temporary House chamber to be built on the existing foundations of the south wing. The foundations laid in 1793–1796 consisted of two parts: the rectangular outline of the outside walls and the elliptical foundation for the interior arcade. Hoban devised three schemes for a temporary chamber from which the president could choose. Two of the plans called for building a portion of the south wing's permanent structure so the expense of the work would not be wasted once the wing was resumed in earnest. How much to build and how much to spend were the distinguishing factors. Building the one story arcade, putting window sash in the openings, and covering it with a temporary roof was the basis of the first proposal. The second plan called for building the interior arcade and the outside walls to half their intended height. Hoban's third plan called only for a cheap wooden building that would be removed altogether once the south wing was begun.

Working quickly, Hoban produced the plans with cost estimates in about five days. They were sent to Jefferson on June 1, 1801, and the commissioners were informed of the president's selection the following day. In the president's opinion, the wooden building was a waste of money because none of it could be used in the permanent construction of the south wing. Conversely, the plan calling for both the arcade and the outside walls was too expensive. Jefferson approved the middle course, building the arcade and roofing it at an estimated cost of \$5,600. Only the roof and window sash, representing about \$1,000 of its expense, would be lost when further construction of the south wing was undertaken in the future.



Temporary House Chamber (the “Oven”), Looking North
Conjectural Reconstruction, 1989

A provisional chamber for the House of Representatives was built in 1801 upon the central foundations of the south wing, which were laid in 1793–1796. It was a hastily constructed, elliptical room with a notoriously stuffy interior, which helped earn the building its unflattering nickname. (The roof lantern and outside bracing were added in 1803.)

Advertisements appearing in local newspapers invited builders to submit bids for “an elliptical Room in the south Wing of the Capitol.”¹¹⁵ Seven offers were received and the commissioners accepted William Lovering and William Dyer’s bid of \$4,789. Their contract was signed on June 20, 1801, and stipulated that the room be finished by November 1. Lovering and Dyer received a \$1,600 advance when their contract was signed, with the balance due in three installments. According to the *Washington Universal Gazette*, the walls were nearly done by September 10, but by the first day of November the room was still unfinished. Lovering and Dyer apparently fell behind schedule and the commissioners were obliged to put one of their best men, master carpenter Peter Lenox, on the project. He was reimbursed for traveling expenses to Alexandria where he had gone in search of carpenters to help finish the work. Nine carpenters were preparing the floor in the middle of Novem-

ber; a week later they were working day and night, for Lenox bought candles to enable them to continue after sundown. He reported that all the arched window sash were made and put up, the gallery’s railing installed, and lantern posts put up outside. The elliptical room measured ninety-four feet long and seventy feet wide with sixteen arches and fourteen windows. The walls and ceiling were plastered, the roof was shingled, and a 120-foot long gallery had been fitted with three rows of seats. Connecting the new room to the north wing was a one story wooden passage 145 feet long containing the gallery stairs and three water closets.¹¹⁶

Soon after the temporary House chamber was occupied, it became known as the “oven.” The nickname was bestowed partly because of the structure’s shape, which reminded some of a huge Dutch oven, and partly because of its notoriously stuffy interior. Ventilators were installed on the roof to improve the chamber’s atmosphere, but they never worked satisfactorily. Manasseh Cutler, a representative from Massachusetts, complained that workmen could not fix the ventilators because the House refused to adjourn for Washington’s birthday. Not only was the House disrespectful to the memory of the first president, but every member suffered that day from the bad air and broken ventilators.¹¹⁷ Later in the session, Cutler noted that four Federalists were compelled to miss a late night

vote because of the “suffocating feeling of the air in the Hall.”¹¹⁸ Spectators crowding the gallery did not improve the situation.

During much of President Jefferson’s first term the Capitol was a distinctly odd-looking building. Three sides of the north wing were finished, but the south elevation had been left as a bare brick wall that would eventually be covered by the center building. The elliptical “oven” and its long, narrow passage to the north wing made the Capitol look even more peculiar. The commissioners expended more than \$370,000 on the Capitol and owed the State of Maryland more than \$200,000. They had not been able to sell enough lots to cover the interest on their loans from the Maryland legislature. On January 15, 1802, Secretary of the Treasury Albert Gallatin suggested that the United States government repay the loan to avoid its unnecessary prolongation. He wrote that “no act of Government can more effectually . . . strengthen the internal union of the United States than the prompt and complete extinguishment of public debt.” There was money enough in the treasury, he stated, to cover the commissioners’ obligations.¹¹⁹

On January 11, 1802, President Jefferson sent Congress a message recommending repaying the Maryland loan and applying receipts from future land sales to the treasury as reimbursement. While he did not condone the commissioners’ debt, he acknowledged that “their embarrassments have been produced only by over strained exertions to provide accommodations for the government of the Union.”¹²⁰ A committee of the House of Repre-

sentatives then recommended abolishing the board and paying its debts from the treasury. The recommendations were enacted into law on May 1, 1802.

The money problems that had plagued the commissioners from the beginning of their work were not the only reason for which the board was abolished. Another was that it had been the creature of the Federalist past and had been stocked with Federalist partisans; although both Alexander White and William Thornton were friendly to the new administration, Tristram Dalton, an old ally of John Adams, was a holdover who needed to be stricken from the public rolls. Further, their handling of the city’s financial affairs indebted the nation and resulted only in a small number of buildings less than half finished, set in a landscape that had seen few improvements in roads, walks, or gardens. Finally, now that the government was “fixed” on the Potomac, there was no further need for commissioners to handle the city’s affairs for an absentee administration. With Jefferson’s love of architecture and building, he would personally direct future development, and he did not want middlemen.

The final entry into the board’s minutes ordered accounts settled and salaries paid in accordance with “An Act to abolish the Board of Commissioners in the City of Washington.” Dr. Thornton, whose hopes for the future were pinned to the city’s fortunes, concluded the entry with a flourish of swirling lines under the words: “*Finis Coronat Opus!*” The End Crowns the Work!