THOMAS U. WALTER AND THE CAPITOL EXTENSION

Washington and Jefferson's Capitol was designed for a nation straddling the Atlantic seaboard. Two generations later, the country stretched across North America, and its increasing number of lawmakers needed more room to conduct the nation's business. The astonishing growth of the country prompted a major building campaign that tripled the size of the Capitol. Spacious legislative chambers were designed, the Library of Congress was expanded, and scores of new committee rooms and offices were built. Elegant public lobbies, corridors, and stairs were decorated with exquisite marbles and murals to rival the great palaces of Europe. The Capitol of the Latrobe-Bulfinch period was transformed into a sparkling jewel glittering with the finest materials, art, and architecture money could buy. A remarkable new dome—a breathtaking feat of architecture and engineering—completed the transformation and became a symbol of American self-government and democracy.

On September 25, 1850, the Senate instructed its Committee on Public Buildings to hold a competition for the enlargement of the Capitol.[1] Four days later, Congress gave President Millard Fillmore responsibility for deciding how the Capitol would be extended. While neither he nor the House of Representatives was under any obligation to accept the results of the Senate competition, the competition proceeded anyway: there was nothing to lose except $500 from the contingency fund. While some eager architects may have thought that the Senate competition would determine who would get the prized commission, it merely set the stage for the real competition over which Fillmore would later preside.

An advertisement from the Senate committee began appearing in Washington newspapers on September 30, 1850, the day Congress adjourned. As in Hadfield's, Latrobe's, and Bulfinch's day, the prospect of long-term employment on the nation's most prominent building was a powerful enticement. The advertisement read:

Enlargement of the Capitol

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

The Capitol Extension (Detail)
by Thomas U. Walter, 1851
The Athenaeum of Philadelphia

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

In composing the newspaper advertisement, the committee repeated some of the same mistakes made by the old board of commissioners when it advertised for a Capitol design in 1792. It offered little guidance and did not give architects enough time to adequately study the problem and make presentable drawings. The only architectural guideline given was that the addition must blend with the existing building. No variance from the neoclassical style would be considered, no stylistic transformation would be allowed. Committee members seemed not to expect any single design to fulfill every requirement and therefore provided for several architects to be compensated for ideas that might be blended into a hybrid scheme.

Perhaps the strangest aspect of the advertisement was the suggestion to build a separate structure in the east garden. This solution to Congress's space problems was entirely novel. An anonymous writer referred to the proposal as the *"Siamese twin plan"* or—supposing the two buildings would be connected with a courtyard between—the "square *Barrack plan.*"[2] It was, by any reckoning, a distinctly odd idea.

At least thirteen architects responded to the advertisement—seven from the Washington area, two from New York City, and one each from Philadelphia, Boston, Hartford, and St. Louis.[3] A few were prominent members of the architectural profession: Robert Mills of Washington and Thomas U. Walter of Philadelphia enjoyed national reputations and are well-remembered today. Others, such as Charles B. Cluskey of Washington (recently relocated from Georgia), Charles F. Anderson and Cyrus W. Warner of New York, and Frank W. Vodges of St. Louis, were less famous, although well known in their regions.

On December 3, 1850, the competition drawings were put on public display in the Library of Congress. Soon thereafter they were moved to a room where the House and Senate Committees on

Eliza and Robert Mills

Daguerreotype by Jessie H. Whitehurst, ca. 1851

National Portrait Gallery, Smithsonian Institution

This photograph was taken about the time Mills (1781–1855) was competing for the commission to enlarge the Capitol. No living architect knew the building better than Mills, nor had given its expansion greater thought.

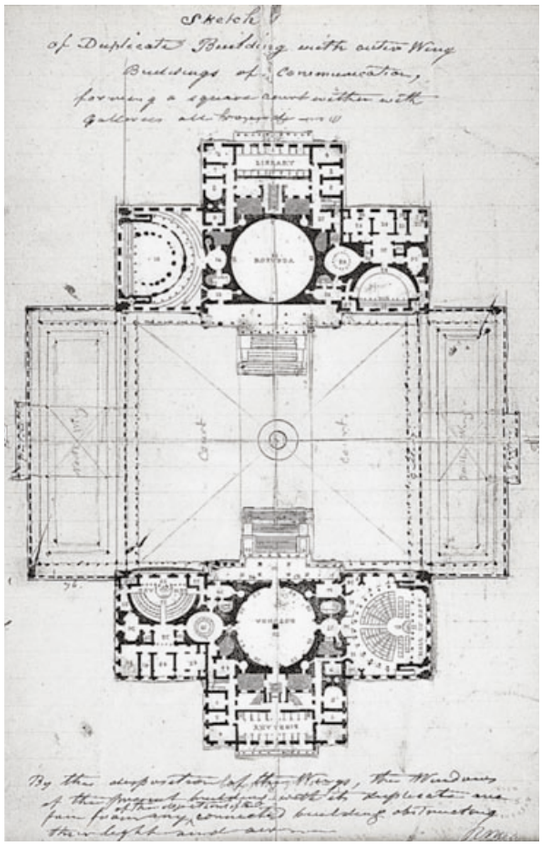
At the time Mills sat for this photograph he was near the end of a long and distinguished career that included close ties (as architect or builder or both) to five major Washington landmarks: the Patent Office (1836); the Treasury Building (1836); the General Post Office (1839); the Smithsonian Institution (1847); and the Washington Monument (1848). At age nineteen he had worked for James Hoban at the President's House, and he later joined B. Henry Latrobe at the Capitol as a student, draftsman, and clerk. Despite his long experience, Mills could not match the vigor and talent of a younger generation of architects competing for the honor of enlarging the nation's Capitol.

Public Buildings could inspect them privately. While only a few drawings survive, the designs were described in cover letters that give valuable insight into the thoughts behind the lost drawings.[4] In accordance with the newspaper advertisement, most of the architects submitted at least one design for wings and one for a separate building. Some submitted multiple designs showing small variations on the two themes. William P. Elliot of Washington, for instance, submitted twelve drawings illustrating eight schemes. Charles Anderson's design called for wings enclosing the east plaza into a forecourt similar to the one he admired at Buckingham Palace in London. A tall fence would enclose the eastern perimeter of the forecourt, and he proposed relocating Greenough's statue of Washington to a new pedestal on top of a ceremonial gateway. Colonel J. J. Abert of the Army Corps of Topographical Engineers resubmitted a design for wings originally drawn in 1844 by his corps with William Strickland's help. He also sent another design for wings, drawn by Phillip Harry, that was more ornamental and consequently more expensive.

The design Robert Mills submitted for north and south wings was similar to what the committees had already seen. He proposed detached, rectangular buildings connected to the Capitol by covered, open-air colonnades.[5] But it may have surprised senators to find Mills more enthusiastic about two schemes he designed for a "duplicate Capitol." Both called for a replica of the Capitol positioned 300 feet east of the existing structure. One plan showed the buildings connected by a central hyphen 160 feet wide containing a huge new room for the Library of Congress. A grand colonnade and stairs were placed along the north and south elevations, making these the principal fronts of a vastly enlarged building. A new dome 200 or 300 feet high designed after that of St. Paul's Cathedral in London crowned the central library section. Chambers for the House and Senate were located in the new east wing with a central rotunda somewhat smaller (seventy-six feet in diameter) than its counterpart in the old Capitol, which, in turn, became the west wing in this plan.

Mills also proposed a second way to connect the Capitol with its mirror image, one that eliminated the library hyphen in favor of a central courtyard created by enclosing the north and south perimeters with "colonnaded terraces." In the center of the courtyard, Mills proposed to erect a column 200 feet high dedicated to the American Revolution. On top of the column would be a fifteen-foot-tall bronze statue of Liberty, which would hold the American flag when either house of Congress was in session. Near the top of the column, Mills proposed placing a great clock with four illuminated dials ten feet in diameter. His memorial to the Revolution would have surpassed the Washington monument in Baltimore and Nelson's column in London by more than thirty feet.

In one of his eight designs, William P. Elliot proposed a duplicate Capitol connected to the old building by a glass-topped central gallery that would be used perhaps as a library or simply as a promenade from the old to the new rotunda. One variation would crown the connecting building with a new dome covering a third rotunda, which he called "The Great Public Hall." Another Washington architect, James King, planned new chambers in a duplicate Capitol with the intervening



Sketch of Duplicate Building with outer Wing Buildings of Communication forming a square court within with Galleries all round

by Robert Mills

With 1850 unpublished report of the Committee on Public Buildings, Senate Report 145, 31st Congress (SEN31A–D1); Records of the U. S. Senate, Record Group 46; National Archives, Washington, D. C.

Plans of the two Capitols were cut from Mills' *Guide to the Capitol* and pasted on a sheet of paper and the connecting features added. A soaring column dedicated to the Revolution was intended to occupy the center of the courtyard.

Thomas U. Walter
1854

Before being named architect of the Capitol extension, Walter (1804–1887) was closely associated with one of the country's great works of architecture and philanthropy: Girard College for Orphans in Philadelphia. Stephen Girard left the bulk of his $7.5 million estate to the college in a will that dictated the size, materials, and plan of its buildings. In 1832, Walter won an architectural competition for the college complex and, at age 28, topped a field of older and more experienced architects that included his former master, William Strickland.

While Girard College was under way, Walter was commissioned to build a breakwater at La Guaira, the port of Caracas, Venezuela. From 1843 until 1845, Walter served as the project's chief engineer. To transport stone to the site of the breakwater, Walter supervised construction of one of the first railroads in South America.

After Girard College Walter's career was dominated by fourteen years at the Capitol, a period of creativity and hard work seldom matched in the life of an American architect. What promised to be a quiet retirement began in 1865, but it was shattered by financial reverses brought on by the Panic of 1873, which left the architect bankrupt. He accepted a low-paying job at the Pennsylvania Railroad and later joined James McArthur in building the colossal Philadelphia City Hall. He labored there until his death at age 83.

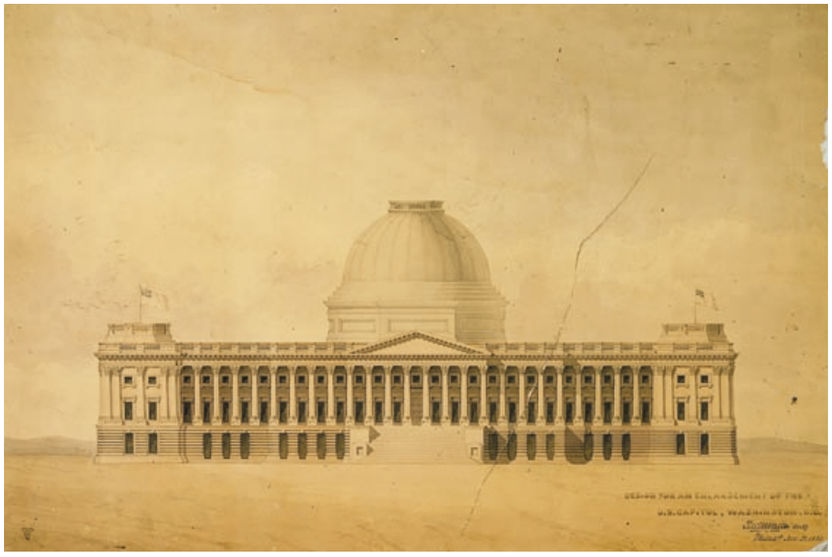
In 1836 Walter called together twenty-three architects from Boston, New York, Philadelphia, Baltimore, Washington, and New Orleans to form the American Institution of Architects. Although short-lived, the institution laid the groundwork for the founding of the American Institute of Architects in 1857. Walter hoped that membership in the AIA would be a badge of honor, helping to cultivate respect for the profession and safeguard its prerogatives. In 1876 he was elected the AIA's second president, and he was serving as such at the time of his death.

space set aside for the newly created Department of the Interior.

One of the more sensible schemes to build eastward came from the Philadelphia architect Thomas U. Walter. He ignored the "duplicate Capitol" idea, designing instead an addition to the east front of the existing building. Unlike Mills' design for an east extension published in 1849, Walter's proposed addition covered the entire east elevation of the Capitol, burying it behind courtyards and connecting corridors. From the carriage front, the Capitol would be totally transformed into a single, massive block with a twenty-five-bay portico between small end pavilions. From the west the Capitol would appear unchanged. The strength of the design lay with its floor plan. A monumental passage lined with forty columns connected the new entrance to the rotunda door. Just off this corridor were the new chambers for the House and Senate, designed without curving walls or domed ceilings that might promote echoes.

One of America's leading architects, Richard Upjohn, was in Europe when the competition was announced. Upon returning home, he learned of the contest but realized there was not enough time to prepare drawings and estimates. He nonetheless

Founders Hall
Girard College, ca. 1860
Author's Collection



Design For An Enlargement of the U. S. Capitol Washington, D. C.

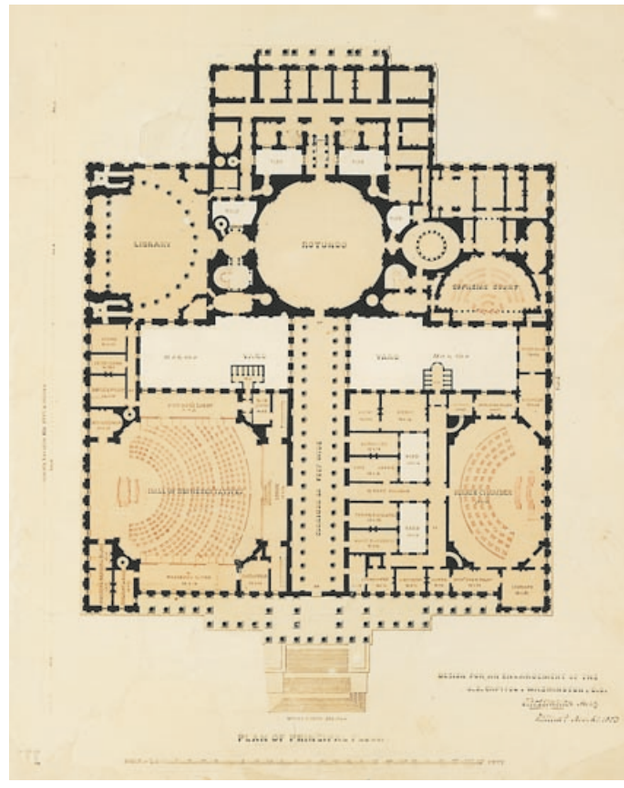
by Thomas U. Walter, 1850

The east elevation was dominated by an extensive portico with thirty-four columns, some of which were to be reused from Bulfinch's portico.

Perspective View of a Design For Enlarging the U. S. Capitol

by Thomas U. Walter, 1850

From the east and side elevations, Walter's proposed addition would have transformed the Capitol into a totally different building. The design was not approved in the Senate, chiefly because of Jefferson Davis' opposition.



Design For An Enlargement of the U. S. Capitol Washington, D. C.

by Thomas U. Walter, 1850.

The close proximity of the chambers was a feature admired in this plan. Not having to purchase additional land or deal with the sloping ground of the west lawn were two others. This plan was favored by the majority of the House Committee on Public Buildings, as well as the chairman of the Senate Committee on Public Buildings.

wished to be considered and wrote a letter to the Senate committee expressing interest. He offered to take on the duties of architect for a negotiated fee and suggested the $500 prize money be deducted from his first paycheck. In offering his services, Upjohn said he was motivated by the desire to see American public buildings "alike creditable to our country, to our age, and to the profession to which I am devoted." He excused himself for not entering the competition, saying such a contest was highly disagreeable, a sentiment widely held by architects both then and now:

> I have not been in the habit of joining in the scramble for employment by presenting competition plans as such a mode of doing business is not agreeable to my views and feelings as a professional man and does not commend itself to my judgement.
>
> . . . I hope to see the time when architects may be employed as we employ painters, sculptors, physicians, and lawyers, because we believe them to understand their business and can best do what we commission them to do. Whenever I can meet parties on such grounds I have no fear of the result.[6]

Upjohn's tactic did not win him the commission he sought, and he would not be the only one disappointed in the long, perverse process of naming an architect to enlarge the Capitol. After the designs had been reviewed by the House and Senate Committees on Public Buildings, it became clear that there would be no agreement on how the building should be enlarged. The Senate still preferred wings and the House was equally adamant about an eastward expansion. While they waited for the president to begin his selection process, the Senate divided the $500 premium among five contestants. William P. Elliot and Philip Harry shared first-place honors and were awarded $125 each. Robert Mills and Charles F. Anderson tied for second place and were each given $100, while Thomas McCleland of Alexandria, Virginia, earned $50 for his entry.[7]

Soon after the awards were made, the Senate Committee on Public Buildings asked Mills to study the entries and incorporate their best features into a new composite design. He quickly finished the job and the design was presented to the full Senate by Jefferson Davis on February 8, 1851. (While not the committee's chairman, Davis was its most dynamic member.) The plan called for north and south wings directly attached to the ends of the Capitol. They were recessed from the western elevation to avoid the expense of sinking foundations into the slope of Capitol Hill and were necessarily extended beyond the eastern elevation. Thus positioned, the new wings would put the dome in the center of the building's mass when viewed from north or south. The committee considered this an important point and mistakenly thought it would "restore to the rotundo the central position which it had in the original design."[8] Again citing restoration to the "classic

Proposed Enlargement of the Capitol

by Robert Mills
ca. 1851

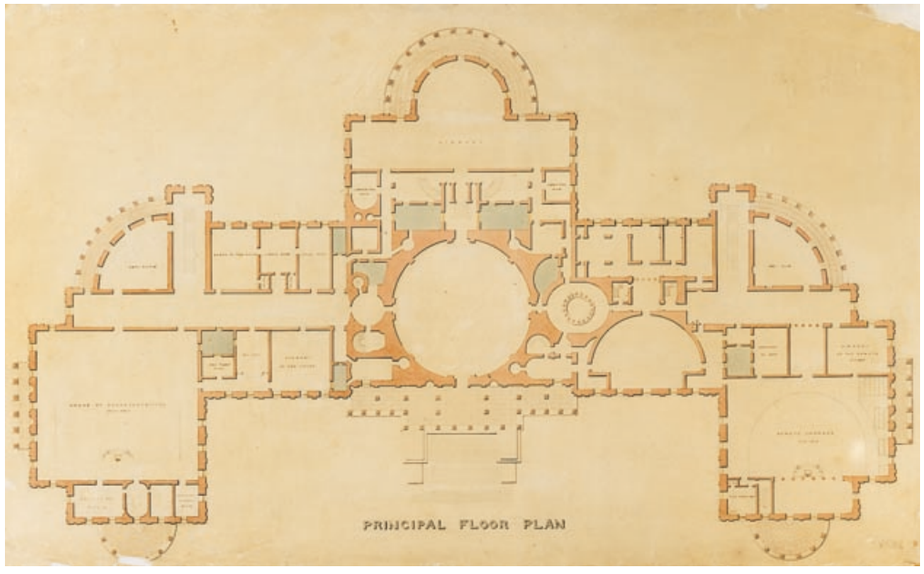
After the 1850 competition closed, Mills was asked to combine the best features of several entries into a composite design, which came to be known as the "Senate Plan." Wings were attached directly to the ends of the old building while a new dome crowned the center.

beauty and simplicity of the first plan," Davis proposed to reduce the height of the central dome and remove the domes over the House and Senate wings, and he argued that the appearance of each elevation would be improved by the addition of the new wings. All future requirements of the House and Senate, their committees, and the library would, he was sure, be satisfied as well. Davis promised it would not cost half as much as a duplicate building, and the committee considered the expense of wings the lowest expenditure that would accomplish the project goals. The cost of the enlargement was an estimated $1,291,000.

While the Senate took a public position on the Capitol extension, the House of Representatives did not. Its Committee on Public Buildings failed to issue a report because one of its members, Andrew Johnson of Tennessee (future president of the United States), objected and it could not report unless its members were unanimous. To satisfy public curiosity, however, the committee chairman, Richard Stanton of Kentucky, decided to publish an account of the committee's findings in the *National Intelligencer* of March 7, 1851.[9] After giving a synopsis of the enlargement question, he explained that his committee objected to building wings because of the expense involved in enlarging the grounds and altering the terraces. It also objected to placing great distance between the two chambers, which would be reached through narrow and intricate passages inside or balconies outside. Stanton condemned the necessity of shutting the light and air out of the old building and noted that noise and dirt would infiltrate the halls of Congress while the wings were under construction. In his opinion, all objections would be avoided by adding an eastward extension as favored by the House Committee on Public Buildings:

> The plan adopted by the majority of the House committee, and approved in all its main features by the chairman of the Senate committee, is one designed and presented by Thomas U. Walter, Esq., of Philadelphia, a gentleman of great practical experience, and eminently distinguished for his skill and genius as an architect. It combines all the conveniences desirable in the proposed enlargement, is harmonious and beautiful in architectural design, and may be constructed without excessive expenditure.

Stanton wrote that columns and steps from the old east portico would be reused in a new portico, which would be enlarged with eight new columns. Two new porticoes would add interest and grandeur to the north and south sides of the building. The chambers were designed with particular attention to acoustics. Ceilings were to be no higher than thirty feet, horizontal, and deeply paneled. No curving surfaces would promote reverberations or echoes. The old hall of the House would be converted into the Library of Congress and its former room either continued as a library or divided into committee rooms. Hot water pipes connected to boilers in the basement would be used to warm the extension. It was Walter's preferred method of heating, one that avoided the "carbonic acid-gas" produced by hot air furnaces. Although unnecessary, fireplaces would be built in every room to provide cheerful fires for those unaccustomed to central heating.



Principal Floor Plan
by Robert Mills, ca. 1851

By advancing the wings eastward, Mills avoided the embankments of the west terrace, which would save on construction costs. In place of the old hall of the House, Mills drew a suite of rooms for the clerk, a post office, and a library. New House and Senate chambers occupied most of their respective wings. The congressional library was enlarged by an apse as well as its extension across the entire west central building.

Jefferson Davis wanted this plan adopted but encountered opposition in the House of Representatives.

THE PRESIDENT'S DECISION

During the second session of the 31st Congress, which ran from December 2, 1850, to March 3, 1851, Washington swarmed with architects. Contestants in the Senate competition came to explain their designs and to meet with anyone who could help them gain favor in Congress or with the president. Those who lived nearby had a natural advantage, but reliable, fast, and cheap railroad transportation gave architects from Philadelphia, New York, and Boston quick access to the nation's capital as well. Several new faces were seen around town, most notably Ammi B. Young of Boston, while William P. Elliot and others dropped out of the contest. Almost daily, the president's mail brought letters of recommendation from politicians and other influential friends. Some architects wrote eloquent testimonials of their political support or damning testimony against their competitors. Charles Frederick Anderson seemed to have been a particularly industrious letter writer, offering advice and indulging in grand self promotion. In one missive, he recounted with alarm a rumor he heard in New York suggesting the president would not appoint an architect who did not support the Whig party. Thinking it would help his cause, Anderson wrote that he strongly believed whomever was appointed should "strain every nerve to keep in power the party or individual by whose means they obtain such extensive and honorable employment."[10]

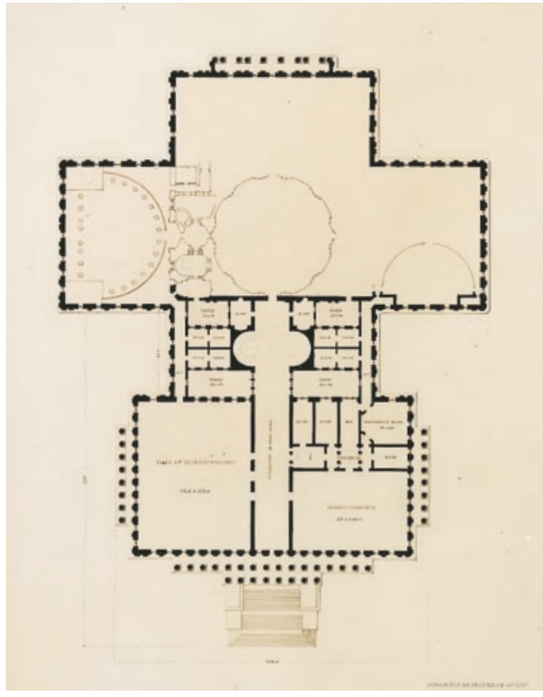
One of the competing architects, Thomas U. Walter, kept an account of his trips to Washington as well as a record of the meetings he had with the president and other politicians.[11] His activities illustrate what was necessary to compete for an important federal commission. Eight days after the competition was announced, he was in Washington meeting with Senator Hunter, chairman of the Committee on Public Buildings, as well as Congressman Joseph R. Chandler of Philadelphia. Walter and Chandler had been friends for a quarter-century, brought together by their mutual association with Girard College—Chandler was a member of the board of trustees and Walter had been the architect and later a fellow board member. Walter made a second trip on October 17, 1850, when he carefully examined the Capitol and studied the problem of making additions to it. A third trip began on November 22, soon after he completed the eight drawings he submitted to the Senate Committee on Public Buildings. During his twelve-day stay, Walter met with Robert Beale, the Senate sergeant at arms, who introduced him to President Fillmore at the White House. He had several meetings with members of Congress, met with Joseph Henry, the secretary of the Smithsonian Institution, attended the opening of Congress, met a second time with the president, was introduced to the secretary of the treasury, and met again with Senator Hunter. When he returned to Philadelphia, Walter worked on a perspective of his design to enlarge the Capitol with an eastern extension, which he presented to the Senate committee during his fourth visit beginning on December 12. He spent an evening in the company of Congressman Stanton, beginning a warm and friendly relationship. With Stanton and Senators Hunter and Davis, Walter explained his plans for the extension and took the opportunity to review designs submitted by others. Until he left the city, on December 20, Walter paid calls on congressmen and senators, which he repeated during his fifth visit—a short stay of only two days on January 10 and 11, 1851. During his sixth trip to Washington, beginning on February 11, Chandler took him to see the president and he passed another pleasant evening with Chairman Stanton.

During these meetings and visits, Walter was swamped with ideas and suggestions that he was obliged to digest and reconcile. Throughout the spring of 1851 he kept up the backbreaking combination of visiting Washington and spending grueling hours over the drafting board in Philadelphia. On February 20, Fillmore and the cabinet had a meeting with all the architects, which lasted four and a half hours. The next day, participants reconvened at the Capitol, where they staked the outline of their plans on the ground. By April 10 Walter finished a series of variations for an eastern extension, north and south wings, and another design combining wings with an east addition. On April 12 he was back in Washington to deliver plans to Colonel Abert, who acted as an advisor to the president. Walter's tenth visit was cut short by the illness of his daughter, which suddenly called him home to Philadelphia. Ten days later he visited Robert Mills, William P. Elliot, and Colonel Abert but was again

obliged to hurry home to his daughter's side. On May 1, just four days after the death of his daughter Irene, Walter and his wife traveled to Washington where he again met with the president and his cabinet. By this time Fillmore had decided to enlarge the Capitol by adding flanking wings, but the question remained of just how the old and new structures should be attached. Placing the wings directly against the ends of the Capitol seemed the most obvious way to connect them, but this meant that all the side windows and doors of the old building would be covered over. Several architects—Mills and Walter among them—had at one time proposed courtyards between the old and new buildings, but no one had devised a satisfactory way of going from one to the other. Secretary of State Daniel Webster finally suggested building the wings some distance from the Capitol and connecting them by narrow corridors. Thus, the light and air coming into the Capitol would not be disturbed, construction activity would be kept away from the occupied building, and as much of the old building as possible would stand free of the additions. It was a superb suggestion.

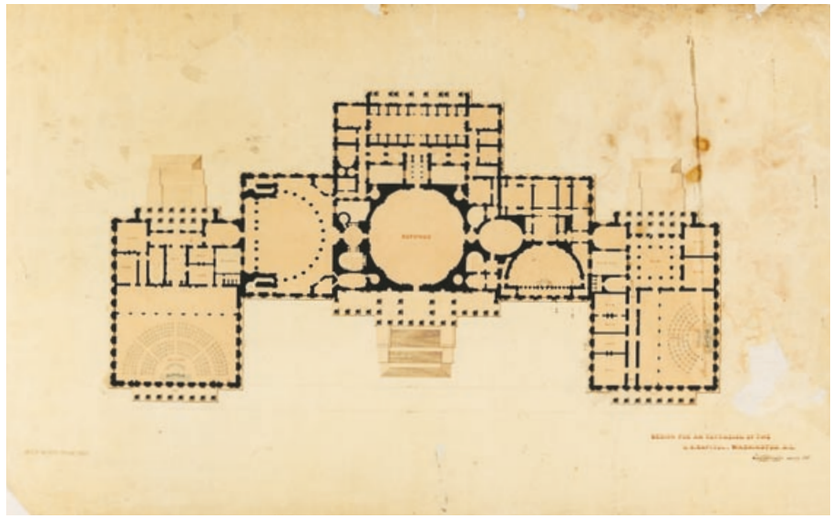
During a cabinet meeting on May 1, the location of the chambers within the new wings was discussed. Placing them in the eastern part had the practical advantage of allowing the wings to be advanced eastward and thus recede from the sloping western grounds. Such a placement would avoid the trouble and expense of sinking foundations thirty or forty feet below the surface. But eastern chambers would also expose legislators to the dust, noise, and smells of the east plaza with all its clanking of horse-drawn carriages and wagons. Fillmore decided that congressmen and senators should instead enjoy the charming prospect and fresh air of a garden view westward toward the Mall.

On May 2, after one more visit to the Capitol, Walter returned to Philadelphia to work on a new plan for the extension with detached wings, connecting corridors, and western chambers. A month later he was back in Washington with new plans, which were immediately sent to the president. On June 4 he explained features of the design to Fillmore and the cabinet. Another meeting took place on June 9, and the next afternoon Walter was notified that the president had appointed him architect of the Capitol extension. He immediately



Design for an Extension of the U. S. Capitol
by Thomas U. Walter
1851

In the spring of 1851 President Fillmore interviewed architects during cabinet meetings where suggestions were made and revisions encouraged. This design was made to show a more economical version of an east extension. The figure $1,259,000 was lightly penciled under Walter's signature.



Design for an Extension of the U. S. Capitol, Washington, D. C.
by Thomas U. Walter, 1851

In a scheme similar to Mills' "Senate Plan," Walter designed wings attached directly to the ends of the old building and advanced them eastward to avoid the west terraces. Here the principal entrances to the wings were from the west.

telegraphed his wife and went to the Capitol to find a room to use as an office. On June 11, Walter took the required oath and returned to Philadelphia to pack up his family for their move to Washington. Eight days later he was back and living in a boarding house with his wife and young children. At a meeting with the president on June 20, Walter was notified that his salary had been set at $4,500 per year and that he should report to the secretary of the interior, Alexander H. H. Stuart. The arrangement was a change from that in Latrobe's or Bulfinch's day, when the architect reported to the commissioner of public buildings, and the incumbent commissioner, William Easby, was not altogether pleased. While he had no authority over Walter, Easby was in a good position to cause trouble in the future.

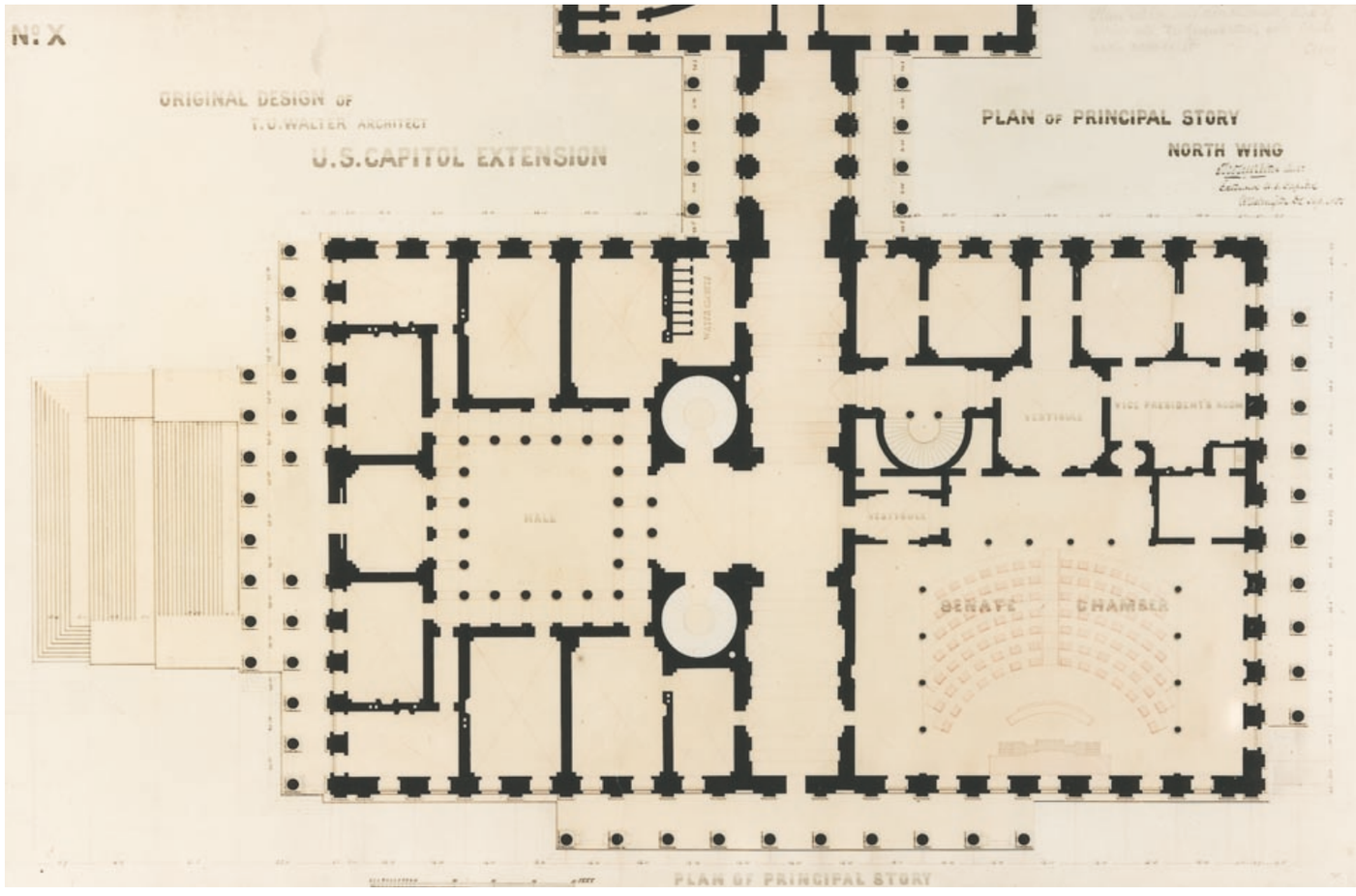
Walter's appointment was greeted with quiet resignation by most architects who wanted the job. Two, however, bristled. Robert Mills had helped father the movement to enlarge the Capitol and he felt that he deserved the appointment by parental right. He bore his loss silently until 1853, when a change in administration opened what he thought was an opportunity to replace Walter, but his efforts to dislodge the victor failed. Another competitor, Charles Anderson, was more embittered and troublesome. He spent the remaining fifteen years of his life engaged in a smear campaign against Walter, eventually landing them in court. But aside from these exceptions, all seemed to agree that President Fillmore made a wise selection when he appointed Walter. It was, after all, an astute political move. In the prevailing spirit of compromise, the president chose the architect favored by the House of Representatives to enlarge the Capitol in the manner favored by the Senate.

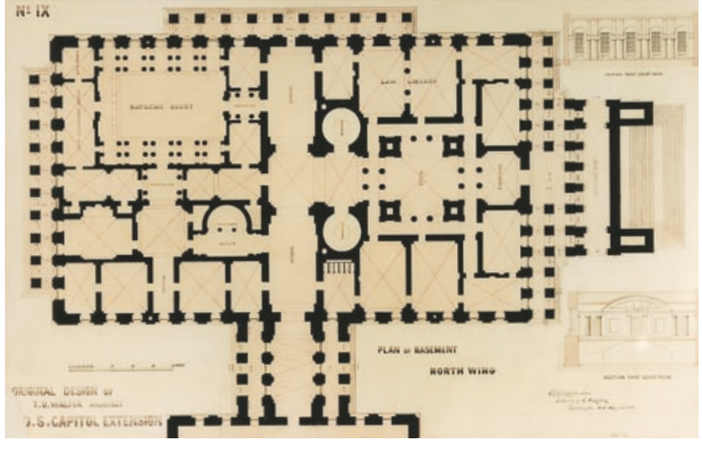
Capitol with the Approved Extension Design
by Thomas U. Walter, 1851
The Athenaeum of Philadelphia

On June 10, 1851, President Millard Fillmore approved Walter's design for wings placed forty-five feet from the ends of the old building and connected to it by narrow corridors. Each wing had three porticoes, with the eastern ones sheltering the principal entrances.

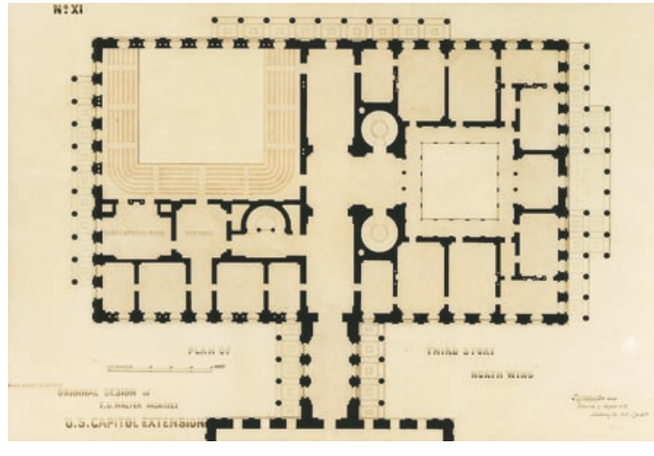
Plans of the North Wing
by Thomas U. Walter, 1851

The Senate chamber was originally to receive light and air from twenty-five windows arranged in two tiers. Light would also be admitted through a skylight in the center of the iron ceiling. The Supreme Court was to have a new chamber on the first floor while the upper story accommodated committee rooms and the galleries.





First Floor

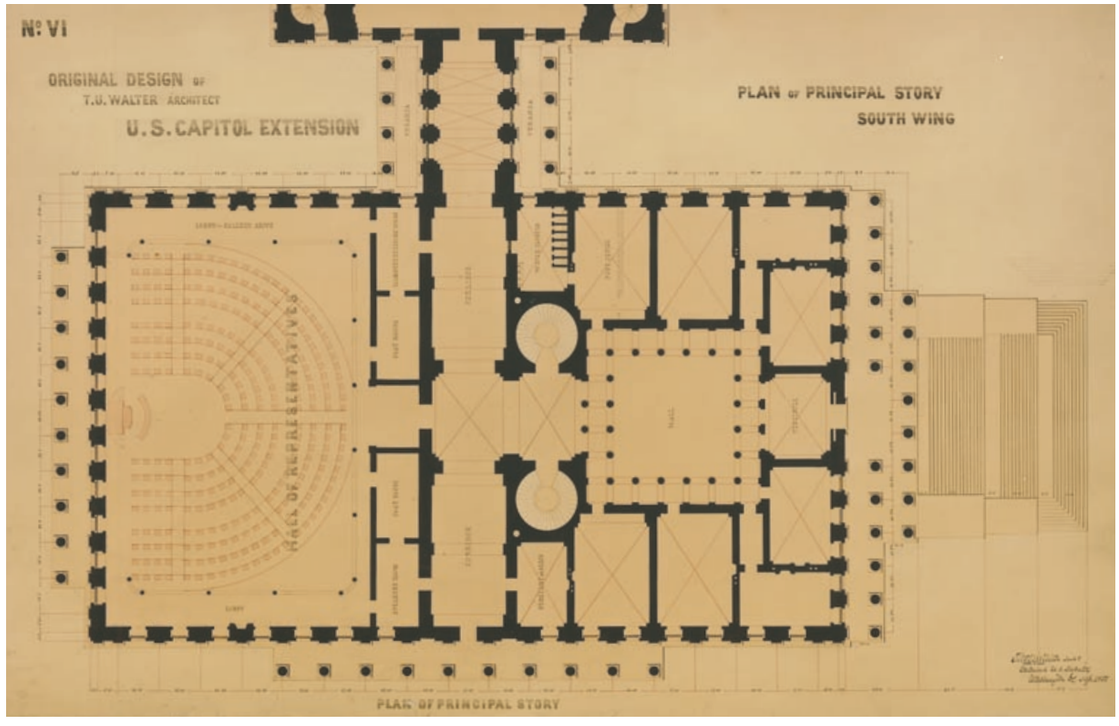


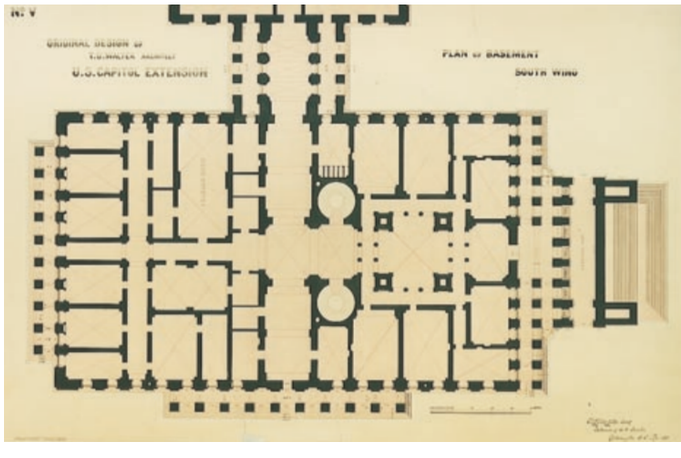
Third Floor

Plans of the South Wing
by Thomas U. Walter, 1851

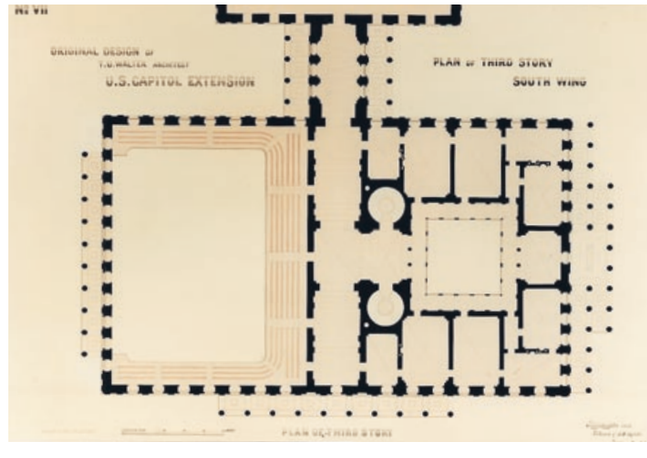
The House chamber occupied the western half of the south wing. There, representatives would enjoy fresh air and garden views away from the dust and noise of the east plaza. On the first floor Walter planned a series of committee rooms, offices, workrooms, storage rooms, and water closets, while the third floor was occupied by more committee rooms and the gallery overlooking the chamber.

The notation indicating that this was the "Original Design of T. U. Walter Architect" was added to the drawing about 1858.

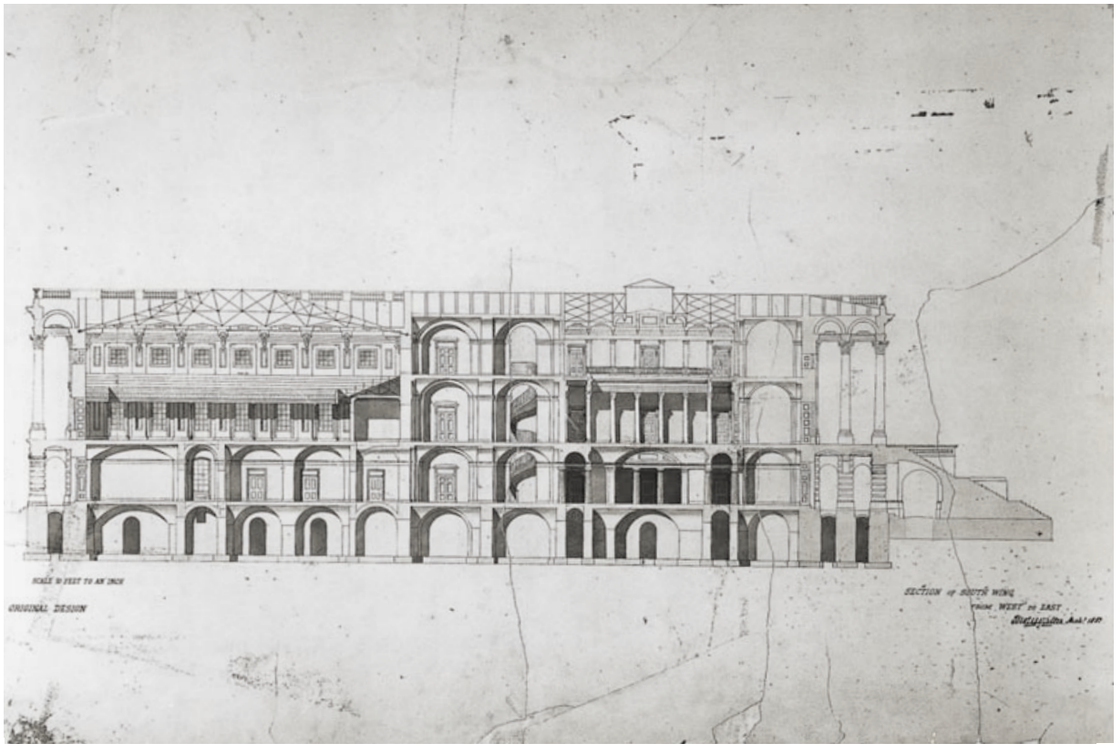




First Floor



Third Floor



Section of South Wing

by Thomas U. Walter
1851

Progressing up the exterior stairs through a columned, two-story hall before reaching the House chamber was simple, clear, and direct. The chamber was designed with an iron ceiling carried from trusses in the attic. A gallery was to be supported by slender iron columns similar to those installed in the old Senate chamber in 1828.

THE THIRD CORNERSTONE

Months before Fillmore appointed Walter, it was generally understood that the cornerstone of the Capitol extension would be laid on July 4, 1851. The approaching national anniversary gave the president, the cabinet, and the competing architects a useful deadline. Initially, the president did not wish to lay the cornerstone with Masonic rites, feeling that if Masons were invited then Odd Fellows would have to be invited as well. Sentiments against the Masonic fraternity had begun in the days of Andrew Jackson's presidency, when critics complained about the group's alleged exclusiveness and its acknowledged secrecy. Fillmore himself was considered anti-Mason, and it was not until July 1 that he agreed to a Masonic ritual at the cornerstone ceremony.

Despite hurried arrangements, events surrounding the laying of the extension cornerstone went smoothly. The commissioner of public buildings hired Nicholas Acker to prepare a granite block to serve as one of the two cornerstones. An awning of coarse linen was stitched to protect the speaker's platform from rain or sun. J. V. N. Throop was paid eighteen dollars for engraving the metal plate. One of Walter's apprentices, Clement West, ordered $40.44 worth of coins from the Philadelphia mint to be deposited in the cornerstone along with views of Washington, newspapers, and other materials. Laborers dug the foundation trenches following the lines staked out by the architect.

Prior to the ceremony, newspapers printed the program drawn up by Richard Wallack, the marshal of the District of Columbia. They called on parade participants to assemble at city hall at 10 o'clock on the Fourth. The parade's first division was mostly made up of the marshal, his aides, and officers of the army and navy, including veterans of the Revolution, the War of 1812, and the war with Mexico. The second division, by far the most diverse, included three persons who had been present at the 1793 cornerstone laying; President Fillmore; present and past cabinet members; members of Congress; the architect of the Capitol extension; Supreme Court justices; the diplomatic corps; the

clergy; state governors; the corporate authorities of Alexandria, Georgetown, and Washington; and the Society of Cincinnati. The third division was composed of about 200 Masons from Virginia, Maryland, Pennsylvania, and the District of Columbia. The final two divisions included temperance and benevolent societies, literary associations, colleges, and schools.

July 4, 1851, was an unusually mild day, a welcome respite from Washington's notoriously steamy summers. The day began with church bells ringing and artillery salutes from various spots around the city. At eight o'clock a procession headed by President Fillmore marched from the White House to the Washington Monument, where a stone quarried at Valley Forge was presented by the Pennsylvania Sons of Temperance. After the usual speeches, salutes, and benedictions, the president's party went to city hall to join the parade that would soon march to the Capitol. Newspaper accounts described the procession with enthusiastic approval:

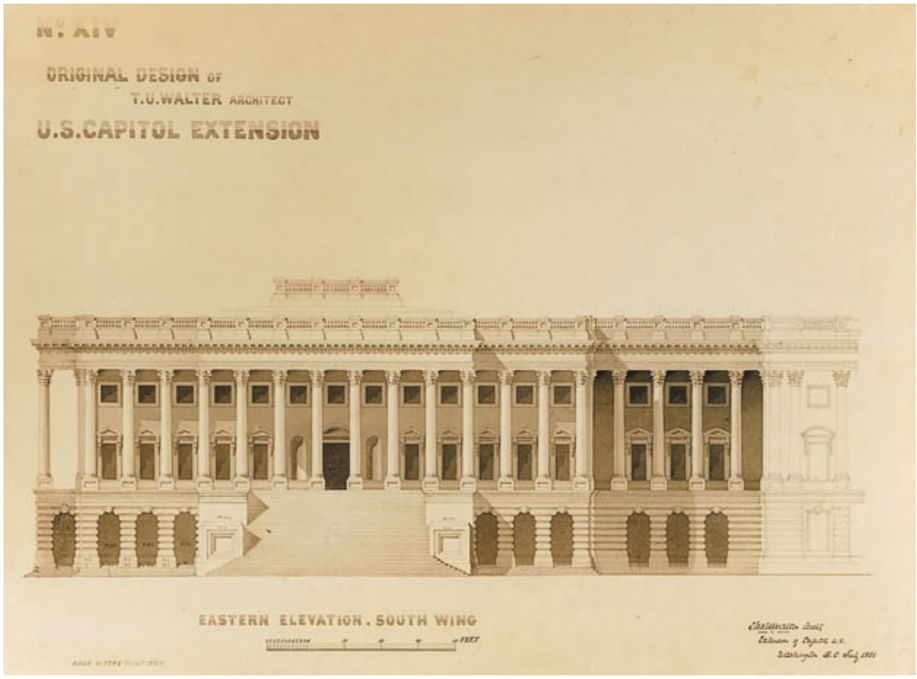
> We have never witnessed, under such short notice, a finer display of our volunteer companies: the Washington Light Infantry Band deserve high credit for their recent improvement, and the Sharpshooters paraded their fine new set of musical instruments for the first time. The visiting companies of Baltimore, though few in number, attracted considerable attention.
>
> The array of Officers of the Army and Navy was one of the most imposing features of the pageant, including amongst them thirty or forty brave veterans, many of whom had faithfully spent the flower of their lives in the service of their country. . . . When again will our countrymen be favored with an opportunity like this?[12]

The procession reached the Capitol at 11:30. The Senate chaplain delivered a "fervent" prayer opening the ceremony. Into the hollow granite cornerstone Walter placed a glass jar containing newspapers, documents, coins, and a patriotic statement written by Secretary of State Webster. The stone was then laid by the president with "great dignity and solemnity." With that done, the Masons took over, making deposits in their stone, lowering it on top of the first stone, and consecrating it with the "corn of nourishment, the wine of refreshment, and the oil of joy." Holding the same gavel used by Washington in 1793, the grand master, Benjamin Brown French, tapped the stone and pronounced it "well laid, true and trusty." Turning to Walter, he handed over tools of the architectural profession—a square, a level, and a plumb—with a prayer that the work might be successfully completed.

Following the presentation, the ceremony continued on the platform on the steps of the Capitol. French was the first to speak. He described the nation's progress since the Capitol's first cornerstone was laid and spoke of the "sacred fire of liberty" and the "dark and dismal clouds of disunion," which, he was happy to say, had been weathered by the "good old Ship of State." Henry Clay headed a list of patriots whom French called the "saviors of this glorious galaxy of American States . . . the pillars of their country in the hour of her darkest trial."

Ready to deliver the principal address was the venerable secretary of state. As Webster approached, he was greeted with enthusiastic cheers. His reputation as a mighty orator attracted a large audience, many of whom came early to stand close to the platform so as not to miss a word. And Webster did not disappoint them. For two hours the eloquent statesman held his audience captive, reciting statistics illustrating the growth of the country and its industry, agriculture, commerce, population, and government. He evoked the memory of Washington, praised the blessings of liberty, and called the secession of southern states "the greatest of all improbabilities." It was an address full of classical allusions, long, learned quotations from Cicero (delivered, of course, in Latin), and proud reminders of America's own progress and history. It was to be Webster's last great speech, his last plea for the preservation of the Union.

An artillery salute followed the conclusion of Webster's address. The military and civic organizations "returned in excellent order to their respective places of rendezvous." At nightfall, the celebration concluded with fireworks on the Mall. The Capitol's third cornerstone had been set amid one of the most elaborate ceremonies ever held in Washington. For the moment, the nation's future appeared peaceful and secure.



Eastern Elevation, South Wing
by Thomas U. Walter, 1851

A few weeks after the cornerstone of the extension was laid, Walter completed a series of exterior elevations showing the design in detail.

ON THE JOB

Initially, Walter's office was set up in one or two empty committee rooms in the Capitol, which he surrendered when Congress returned in the fall. On December 18, 1851, the office moved into rented rooms above the Adams Express Office on A Street north. There, Walter's room was the center of drafting activity while an adjacent clerk's room was the business center. Both were plainly furnished with carpets; coal stoves; wash stands with pitchers, basins, and hand towels; and looking glasses. The architect's office had three pine drawing tables, two mahogany writing tables with cloth covers, eight drawing boards, a bookcase, three armchairs, and eight Windsor chairs. A fireproof safe protected building contracts, proposals, and other important documents. Official letters from the Department of the Interior, applications for employment, bills, and invoices were filed in a large mahogany case. Drafting paper came in long rolls, and finished drawings were hung in racks. The number of draftsmen working under Walter varied from time to time. At the beginning of the work two young students from Philadelphia, Clement West and Edward Clark, came to Washington to continue their apprenticeships. They were soon joined by August Schoenborn, a German architect whom Walter considered a master of perspective and coloring. (Both Clark and Schoenborn would work at the Capitol for the rest of their long careers.)

The clerk's office contained two pine writing tables with baize covers, a pine desk, a swivel chair, and three Windsor chairs. The office journal, ledger, day book, bid book, check book, and cash box were kept in the clerk's safe. Duplicate vouchers were stored in the safe as well. Presiding over the office was Zephaniah W. Denham, whom Walter appointed on July 21, 1851, at an annual salary of $1,200.

The day after he appointed Denham, Walter named Samuel Strong general superintendent of construction. Most likely Strong came to this important job through political influence wielded by backers in New York City and Albany, who had sent Fillmore letters in Strong's favor well before the architect was named. The president may also have recalled that Strong was superintendent of construction for the arsenal in New York City while he was comptroller of the state. With responsibilities similar to those of the position of clerk of the works in Latrobe's day, Strong oversaw work performed by day laborers and insured the quality of

contractors' work. Materials delivered to the site were inspected to guard against fraud, and if any delinquencies or improprieties were discovered, Strong was to report them immediately. His salary was set at $2,000 per year.

Walter recommended that the extension project be advertised for bids and placed under a single contract. The second-best approach, in his opinion, would be to divide the project into multiple parts to be sent out for bids. Either manner of executing the work was preferable to the "days-work system," which he thought suffered from an absence of incentive and motivation.

Fillmore and Stuart agreed with Walter's second recommendation and instructed him to divided the work into as many parts as possible to enlarge competition to the greatest extent.[13] Walter replied that it was too early to consider contracts for such things as roofing, painting, or glazing and he would therefore confine his remarks to parts of the building that lay immediately ahead. His recommendations, approved on September 13, divided the work into six basic contracts:

> —Granite work of sub-basement of both buildings, including materials, in one contract.
>
> —Marble work of the entire exterior, including materials, also in one contract.
>
> —Brick by the thousand.
>
> —Lime and cement by the barrel.
>
> —Sand by the bushel.
>
> —Lumber for centering and scaffolding by the thousand feet.[14]

The first contracts Walter signed were with John Purdy for lumber, Andrew Hoover and Samuel Seely for lime, Joseph Piper for foundation stone, Matthew Emory for granite, Christopher Adams for brick, George Schafer and Alexander Boteler for cement, and A. N. Clements for sand. A quarry just beyond Chain Bridge upriver from Washington supplied the gneiss used to build the foundations of the south wing, while a nearby quarry supplied stone for the north wing. Using hundreds of day laborers, work on the foundations began in August, and by the time the money ran out in December, almost 50,000 cubic yards of earth had been excavated and 18,000 perches of stone laid. The footings were eight feet, nine inches wide and were sunk fifteen feet below ground on the eastern front and forty feet on the west. So much of the western lawn was what Walter called "made ground" that it was necessary to begin the foundations on undisturbed strata located deep below the surface.

By mid-December, the first appropriation for the extension was exhausted. Work came to a halt and the hands were dismissed. Unemployed laborers presented a petition asking Congress to appropriate funds so they might regain a means of support. Many in their ranks had moved to Washington thinking employment would be steady and now found it difficult to find other work due to the cold and wet weather. However, their straightforward request soon became entangled in a political web aggravated by the shenanigans of disgruntled contractors.

On December 16, 1851, Democratic Representative Richard Stanton offered a resolution authorizing the architect to keep the workmen employed until such time as another appropriation was made. Stanton and his friends wanted to see the work—barely four months under way—continued. Other members of the House saw it as a dangerous precedent guaranteeing government employment for anyone who wanted it. Many who opposed Stanton did not wish to abandon the project but objected to the workmen's claim that the government owed them jobs. A member of the Whig party, Daniel Wallace of South Carolina, sounded the alarm in the House:

> I do not recognize the right of any class of persons to come here in person, or by their representative, and demand that appropriations be made to give them employment. Such ideas, sir, as have been advanced on this floor by the honorable gentleman from Kentucky should, in my judgment, be met with the unqualified reprobation of this House and the country. These ideas are but the reflex of those of the French school of communism and the right to labor, which erected the barricades in the streets of Paris in 1848, and from the destructive tendencies of which, France has sought present repose by the restoration of the Empire under military rule of Napoleon II.[15]

Friends of the extension simply wanted funds to restart the project and did not believe that the laborers posed a threat to the republic or to capitalism. Another question was raised that further postponed funding. On January 12, 1852, the House appointed a committee to investigate the firmness

and stability of the foundations.[16] An enemy of the administration and the extension project, John McNair, a Democrat from Pennsylvania, was appointed chairman. After two months of investigation—but before the committee reported its findings—McNair let it be known that he considered the foundations to be in a "dreadful" condition.[17] In his opinion, the mortar was insufficient to bond properly and he claimed to have found many stones loose enough to be dug out by hand. The pronouncements were made a few minutes after Stanton introduced an appropriation to continue the extension through the fiscal year ending June 30, 1853. Seeing the prospects of the appropriation endangered, Stanton reacted with a defense of the project in which he tried to expose outside influences acting on McNair and his committee. He suspected disappointed applicants had attempted "to throw doubt upon the stability of the work."[18] Contractors who failed to get government business came to the chamber "to harass this House, and . . . to lead intelligent and honorable members of Congress into dilemmas, of which, when they learn the whole truth, they will be ashamed."[19] He described the scientific tests that proved the foundations capable of sustaining more than 200 times the weight to be placed on them. The allegations regarding the bonding of stones were rebutted by the facts as well as descriptions of similar foundations that were still standing in Greece after thousands of years. Stanton was well prepared in his defense of the workmanship of the foundations, while McNair seemed ill-equipped to support his position. Reluctantly McNair admitted that his opinions were influenced by a man named Knowles—"one of the best architects, perhaps, in the state of Pennsylvania"—who condemned the foundations after spending a few minutes inspecting them.

A congressman from Ohio, David K. Cartter, spoke of very different fears regarding the foundations. He was not concerned about their stability but warned that they were laid in the wrong place. "They are too near the eastern skirt of the empire," he cautioned,

> and I have no apprehension at all but that it will rest, mechanically, firmly upon its present foundation, and bear upon its surface the edifice you propose to place upon it, until the weight of the empire transfers it to the center of the empire. You had better address yourself to that consideration; for the time is soon coming when the difficulty will not be in the weight upon it, but in keeping the foundation still. The foundations will partake of the spirit of the Republic, and make a western trip.[20]

Cartter was not alone in his belief that the capital would one day be moved to a location closer to the geographical center of the nation. This prediction, often used as a reason to oppose new construction in the federal city, would be heard time and again throughout the remainder of the nineteenth century. One cynical member suggested that the only reason a western congressman would oppose moving the seat of government westward was because those who lived far from Washington received more money for mileage than those who lived close by.[21]

In the Senate, opponents to the Capitol extension were led by Solon Borland of Arkansas, who introduced a resolution calling for their own investigation into the solidity of the foundations. Borland questioned the cost of the project, rejecting the architect's estimate as deceivingly low and warning against greedy workmen who wished the government to operate "a great national almshouse" for their benefit.[22] He painted a dramatic and exaggerated picture of doom and destruction that would ensue if construction were allowed to proceed. The extension was, according to Borland, a "house built upon the sand" that would surely topple and become a "mausoleum to its dupes."[23]

The Senate instructed its Committee on Public Buildings to investigate the foundations and authorized it to call experts into consultation. The committee, in turn, called on the Army Corps of Engineers and the Corps of Topographical Engineers to examine the work. Both bureaus reported favorably. Frederick A. Smith and J. L. Mason of the Corps of Engineers noted that the gneiss or blue stone was excellent and well suited for foundations. The mortar was made properly from hydraulic cement and sand, and the workmanship was excellent. The committee could see no reason to delay construction any longer, especially in view of the fine spring weather. It recommended restarting the work at once.[24]

Senator Borland was unmoved. Facts could not change his mind about the architect or his belief that the Capitol extension was a waste of money. On April 9, 1852, while Senator Hunter tried to

secure an appropriation for the extension, Borland proclaimed that it would be better to sacrifice the $100,000 already expended rather than pursue the wasteful project that would cost many millions in the end. He also criticized the extension on aesthetic grounds, claiming that the building was already too low for its length. To make it any longer without making it taller would, Borland predicted, court architectural disaster. He lamented that the distance between the new chambers would be so great that traveling to and from them would entail a quarter mile round trip. One of Borland's allies, Senator James W. Bradbury of Maine, suggested easing overcrowding by removing desks from the two chambers. Space problems would disappear and legislators would stop writing letters and pay closer attention to the business at hand. Another senator, Joseph R. Underwood of Kentucky, thought that abandoned foundations would do no credit to the nation. He asked his colleagues to imagine a country dotted with similar relics of unfinished business and wondered how the American people would come to view Congress. Clearly, it would not be a sight to honor the country.[25]

At every opportunity, Borland and his lieutenants threw obstacles in the path of the appropriation. Yet at the end of the day, a resolution from the House of Representatives appropriating $500,000 was agreed to by the Senate. On April 14, 1852, it was signed into law. Idle for months, workmen at last went back to their jobs.

MASSACHUSETTS MARBLE

During the debates, Borland occasionally alluded to a contract supposedly worth one and a half million dollars that Walter had signed, which the senator claimed was illegal. Only $100,000 had been appropriated and the architect had no authority to obligate the government beyond that sum. Although he was never specific, Borland was referring to a contract signed on January 13, 1852, by John Rice and John Baird, marble merchants from Philadelphia. The senator was correct in believing that the contract was lucrative and long term, but he was mistaken in believing it did anything more than state the mutually agreed upon prices for marble delivered from their quarry at Lee, Massachusetts. Walter recommended cladding the extension with American marble because the sandstone used in the old building had proven unsatisfactory, especially where it was exposed to the weather. Despite layers of paint protecting the surface, spallation and exfoliation marred its appearance, a condition no one wished to see repeated on the new wings. (During this period only one other public building in Washington was faced with marble. Robert Mills' General Post Office at F and 8th Streets, N. W., was completed in 1842 using marble from Westchester, New York.)

Walter received eighteen bids for marble in response to a newspaper advertisement published on September 19, 1851. Proposals were invited for all the exterior marble, including the material, workmanship, and installation. The bids were accompanied by samples of stone that the contractors proposed to use. After the opening of bids on October 21, 1851, a proposal from Provost, Winter, & Company at $773,918 was the lowest. The firm had executed the stonework at the Patent Office and came highly recommended by the chairman of the House Committee on Public Buildings, Richard Stanton. Before a contract was signed, however, the president wanted the marble tested for strength and evaluated for beauty.

Secretary of the Interior Stuart appointed a five-man commission to test marble samples: General Joseph G. Totten of the Army Corps of Engineers; Joseph Henry, secretary of the Smithsonian Institution; Thomas Ewbank, commissioner of the Patent Office; and Thomas U. Walter. Joining them was America's foremost architectural critic and aesthete, Andrew Jackson Downing of Newburgh, New York, who had recently been engaged by the government to plan landscape improvements for the Mall.

The commission made its one and only report on December 22, 1851.[26] After citing the difficulties of conducting an impartial evaluation of marble given "the present state of science," the report described various experiments carried out on twelve specimens of marble submitted from quarries in Massachusetts, New York, Pennsylvania, and Maryland. The tests were meant to approximate

the effects of weathering and measured such things as density and the pressure necessary to crush the stone. Masons prepared the samples by cutting them into one and a half inch cubes. These were subjected to crushing tests at the Navy Yard using a machine that determined the strength of gun metal. Another test measured the amount of water absorbed by the marbles. Samples were frozen and thawed twenty-eight times in secession to study the probable effects of weathering.

The commission determined that marbles from East Chester and Hastings, New York; Lee, Massachusetts; and Baltimore, Maryland, were appropriate. Letters were sent to the proprietors of these quarries asking them to submit offers while unsolicited testimonials were received explaining the properties that made one marble better than another. Horatio Greenough, for instance, recommend the Lee, Massachusetts, marble. He had personally examined and tested it and found it to be an excellent stone with an even tint and texture. No marble pleased him better for sculpture.[27]

Walter visited the quarries to see if there were enough stone to complete the extension. He did not wish to begin with one marble and finish with another. He found that the Baltimore quarry operated by Provost & Winter (the low bidder) did not contain a sufficient supply, and that firm was therefore eliminated from consideration. By virtue of its beauty, abundance, and strength, the Lee, Massachusetts, marble was selected instead. John Rice and John Baird offered to supply blocks of less than thirty cubic feet for sixty-five cents per foot and larger blocks for $1.98 per cubic foot.

Rice & Baird's contract covered the delivery of marble but not the cutting, carving, or setting. The administration thought it best to separate these aspects of the marble work. Walter recommended Provost & Winter for this work, partly as consolation for having their original bid disqualified but also because he knew them to be faithful and responsible workmen whose rates were quite reasonable. The secretary of the interior forwarded the recommendation to the chairmen of the House and Senate Committees on Public Buildings, who returned it with their approval. On July 12, 1852, Walter signed a contract with Provost & Winter spelling out the prices for cutting, carving, and setting the exterior marble.

The New Capitol
artist unknown
"Drawn After Nature"
for Herman Meyer
ca. 1851

Soon after Walter's design was approved, views of the Capitol with its new wings were published to satisfy the public's curiosity about the "new" building. Even crude depictions such as this conveyed a sense of the intended appearance of the enlarged Capitol.

ANOTHER FIRE IN THE LIBRARY

Two days after the marble commission issued its report, a disastrous fire destroyed the main reading room of the Library of Congress. The fire was discovered around eight o'clock in the morning on December 24, 1851, by John Jones, a guard who noticed a suspicious flickering through the library windows. Having no key, he broke the door down and, once inside, saw a small fire burning near the north end of the room. Later Jones testified that if water had been available he could have easily extinguished the flames on the spot. But he had to run downstairs for water and, by the time he returned, the fire had spread all over the two-story apartment. Alarms were sounded and seven fire companies responded. The first to arrive was the Columbia. Its hose, still wet from fighting a fire elsewhere, was frozen solid by the extremely cold weather and had to be taken to the nearby gas factory to be thawed. The Anacostia engine company arrived next and was the first to fight the fire effectively.[28] Soon other companies were on the western grounds, throwing water on the fire through the library's windows. One fire engine was brought up the east portico steps and a second was hauled into the rotunda. A hose was run into the library to combat the fire, which was done with "power and efficiency." The fire companies were joined by a detachment of U.S. Marines, who assisted in the bucket brigade and wielded axes to cut away sections of the roof that lay in harm's way. The staircase to the dome caught fire and was chopped away to prevent flames from spreading to the vast store of dry wood that comprised the outer dome. Had the dome gone up in smoke, the disaster would have been devastating. Firefighters worked all day and well into the night. On Christmas day, they were still spraying water on the wreckage.

The toll of the disaster was great. Thirty-five thousand volumes—65 percent of the library's holdings—were destroyed. About two-thirds of the books purchased from Thomas Jefferson in 1815 were gone. Manuscripts, maps, and unspecified "articles of *vertu*" had been consumed by the flames. Gilbert Stuart's portraits of the first five presidents were lost, as were two portraits of Christopher Columbus and likenesses of Hernando Cortes, Peyton Randolph, Simon Bolivar, Baron von Steuben, and John Hanson. Busts of George Washington, Thomas Jefferson, Zachary Taylor, and the Marquis de Lafayette, were also destroyed, as was a figure of Apollo. The elegant room damaged by fire in 1826 was now a burnt-out shell: nothing remained but the bare brick walls. No trace of the ceiling or roof could be found. The heat had been so intense that pieces of the sandstone columns of the west portico scaled off, but miraculously there was little damage outside the main library room.

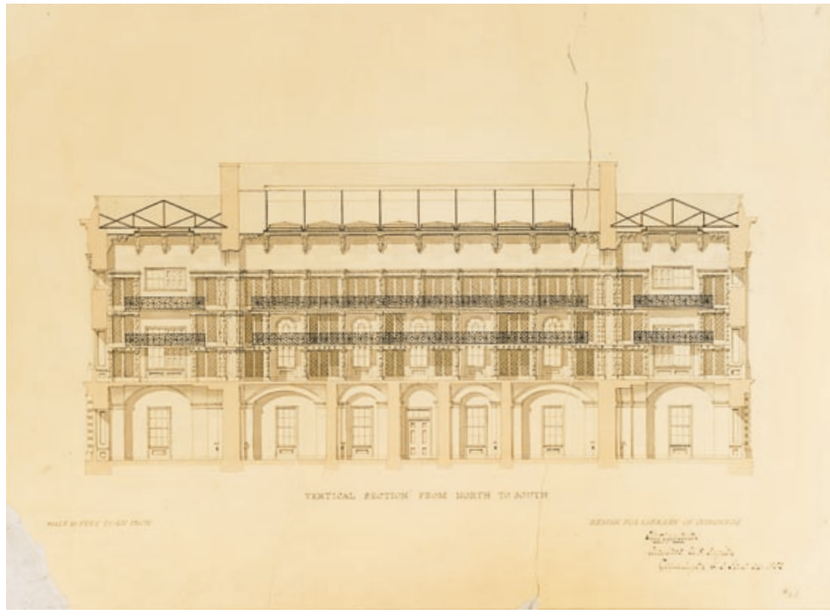
John S. Meehan, the librarian of Congress, wrote the Speaker an account of the fire. He described the public property destroyed by the fire but was pleased to report that about 20,000 volumes housed in adjacent rooms survived, including the entire law library. Having throughout his tenure prohibited the use of candles, lamps, or other artificial lighting devices in the room, Meehan considered the fire's origins mysterious and asked that it be the subject of a "searching investigation."[29]

Commissioner Easby oversaw the removal of rubbish and the installation of a temporary tin roof over the library. To cover these expenses and to pay for the axes and buckets bought to fight the fire, Easby requested an appropriation of $5,000. The secretary of the interior asked the commissioner to investigate the origins of the fire, and he in turn passed the request to the architect of the Capitol extension. On December 26, 1851, Walter reported that the fire was caused by the framing of one of the alcoves coming into contact with a chimney flue. A fire laid in the room under the library used by the Senate Committee on Indian Affairs (modern day S- 152), was left to burn unattended on the morning of the disaster. The sooty flue caught fire and a small hole in the chimney allowed a spark to ignite one of the library's wooden alcoves. "No human forethought or vigilance," Walter concluded diplomatically, "could, under the circumstances, have prevented the catastrophe."[30]

On January 13, 1852, Congress appropriated the money Easby requested as well as $10,000 to begin replenishing the library's holdings. Soon more money was provided to fit up the document room and nearby corridors to serve as a temporary library. Senator James A. Pearce of Maryland, the chairman of the Library Committee, submitted a resolution

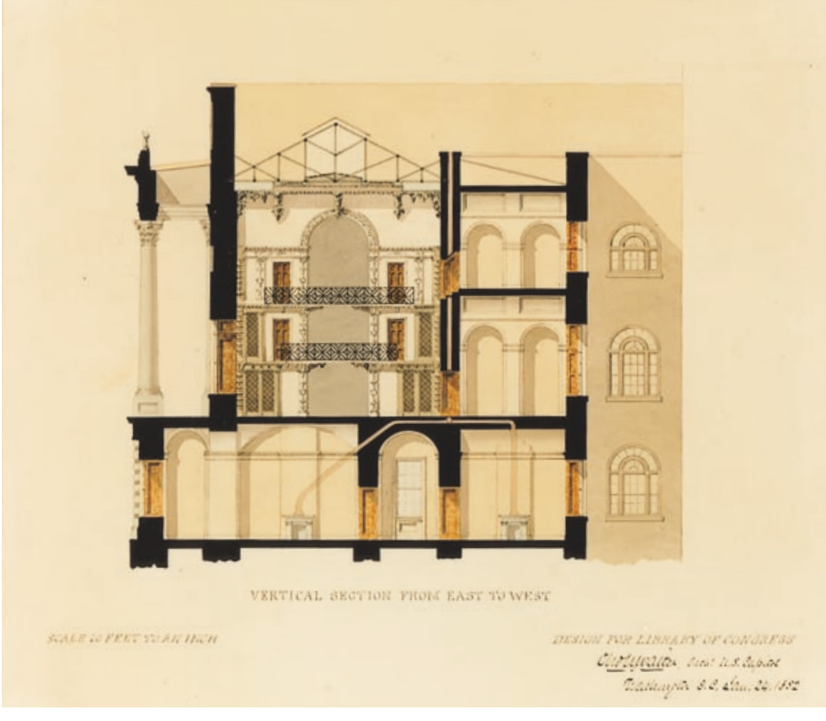
on January 27, 1852, asking Senator Hunter's Committee on Public Buildings to look into the steps necessary to repair the library, making it entirely fireproof and capable of future enlargement.

As the most handy architect, Walter was called upon to design a new interior for the Library of Congress reading room. Two days after the fire, he was asked by Easby and the secretary of the interior to prepare plans and estimates for the library's reconstruction. On January 17, 1852, Walter submitted a report accompanied by architectural plans, sections, and elevations for a new library room. In the short time since the fire, Walter had designed one of the most extraordinary rooms in the history of American architecture—a sparkling, incombustible cast-iron library free of any wood except what might be used for furnishings. The proliferation of architectural applications of iron was as rampant in the 1850s as the exploitation of plastics or aluminum a century later. Iron had played only a small role in the building arts until the industrial revolution permitted widespread use of its strength, resistance to fire, and mass production possibilities. Iron seemed ideally suited for fireproof construction, and Walter used it for the



Section of the New Library Room, Looking West
by Thomas U. Walter, 1852

The central library room was flanked by north and south extensions begun thirteen years after the principal space was reconstructed.



Section of the New Library Room, Looking North
by Thomas U. Walter, 1852

An iron ceiling was the library's most innovative feature. Instead of a single balcony as before, Walter designed two balconies to provide as much shelving capacity as possible.

Perspective of Console Supporting Ceiling

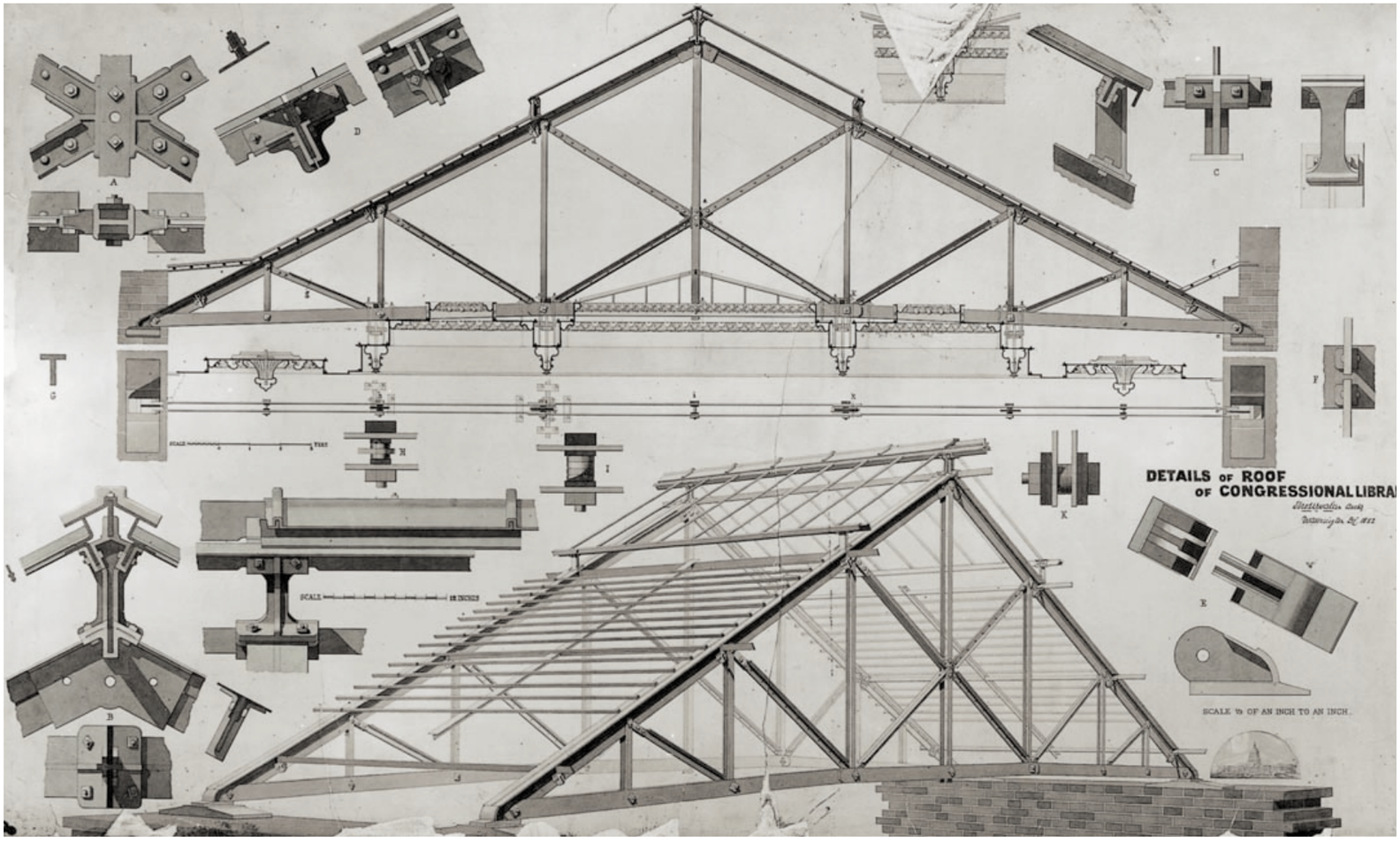
by Thomas U. Walter, 1852

Weighing almost a ton apiece, the consoles Walter designed for the library's ceiling were fine specimens of the rococo taste then current in American decorative arts. Swirling scrolls and shells joined grapes, corn, and acanthus in a decorative and imaginative combination.

Details of Roof of Congressional Library

by Thomas U. Walter, 1852

America's first iron ceiling was constructed in 1852 over the Library of Congress.



library's alcoves, bookcases, galleries, floors, and doors. But the most daring feature of the room's design was its iron ceiling—the first in America and one of the earliest examples in the world. Suspended over the room from iron trusses, the ceiling was made up of thin iron plates cast into deep panels and ornamented with decorative moldings and pendants. Eight skylights, six feet square, were glazed with colored glass. Imposing brackets five and a half feet long weighing almost a ton apiece would help support the ceiling.

To maximize the room's shelving capability, Walter's plan called for a three-tier arrangement with deep alcoves at the first level, shallow alcoves and a walkway above, and bookcases against the upper walls reached from a second balcony. Iron plates were used as balcony flooring, while the main floor would be paved with black and white marble tiles. Double leaf doors at the library's main entrance were made of iron painted to resemble mahogany.

For the future expansion of the library, Walter planned to dismantle a dozen neighboring committee rooms and replace them with a pair of rooms similar to the central reading room but with four levels of book alcoves and shelves. This work would be delayed until committees using the rooms relocated into the Capitol extension. For the work immediately ahead, Walter estimated that $72,500 was needed to build the new iron library in the old, burned-out room. In the House of Representatives, consideration of Walter's report and estimate was urged by his friend, Congressman Chandler of Pennsylvania, on February 12, 1852, but parliamentary wrangling delayed action until the following month. On March 19, 1852, President Fillmore approved the legislation authorizing the repairs and appropriating the funds to carry out the work. Eleven days later, the secretary of the interior appointed Walter the superintendent, architect, and disbursing agent for the library's reconstruction. He was required to post a $20,000 bond to guarantee the faithful discharge of his new responsibilities.[31] Despite the architectural success of the iron library, Walter was never to receive a dime in compensation or a word of thanks for designing it and supervising its reconstruction.

Walter invited ten iron foundries to submit bids for the library work. Eight firms responded, including the Ames foundry in Chicopee, Massachusetts ($77,492), Bogardus and Hoppin in New York ($72,518), and Janes, Beebe & Company in New York ($59,872). The latter offered the lowest bid, indeed the only bid within the appropriation, and was awarded the contract. "I have the satisfaction to say," Walter told the secretary of the interior, "that the work has been executed as well and as faithfully as it could have been done by anyone."[32] Walter had been acquainted with the firm since 1846, when he went to New York in search of furnaces for Girard College and visited the foundry of G. Fox & Company, the predecessor to Janes, Beebe & Company.[33] The friendly collaboration between the architect and the New York ironworkers continued with the Library of Congress reconstruction and flourished throughout Walter's years in Washington.

At first it was thought that the library could be rebuilt in a few months. But by mid-September, when much of the ironwork had been received but not yet installed, it became clear that the room would not be finished by December 6—the opening of the second session of the 32nd Congress. Walter explained to Secretary Stuart that despite working day and night the room would still be unfinished when Congress returned.[34] He also found it would cost about $20,000 more than originally thought. The usual grumbles were heard in Congress when the additional funds were requested. Fayette McMullen, a Democratic congressman from Virginia, complained that Walter had made "a very wide mistake" in his estimate and hoped more accurate calculations would be submitted in the future.[35] Richard Stanton defended the architect, telling his colleagues that much more damage had been caused by the fire than was previously known. Unforseen problems were uncovered once repair work was under way, and these factors justified the architect's request for more money. Similar arguments were heard in the Senate, with Richard Hunter of Virginia supporting the architect and Solon Borland of Arkansas speaking against him. Richard Brodhead of Pennsylvania found it difficult to understand how more than $95,000 could be spent on one room. Hunter responded with a review of the financial aspects of the project and defended the architect's management. He concluded by praising the beauty and novelty of iron architecture, which he

thought would be especially interesting to Pennsylvania industrialists.[36]

Brodhead withdrew his objection and the appropriation passed. Twelve thousand dollars was spent for gilding, bronzing, and painting.[37] The decorative painting, Walter said, was devised especially "to keep up the idea of the whole being composed of metal." He intended the room to dazzle with a "brilliancy and richness consistent with its architecture," and he provided a sketch of the room's decoration in a letter to the secretary of the interior written at the end of 1852:

> All the plain surfaces of the ceiling, both horizontal and vertical, to be gilded in three shades of gold leaf, so disposed as to give depth and effect to the panels.
>
> All the ornamental moldings, pendants, and drops of the ceiling to be finished in gold bronze, and the prominent parts to be tipped with gold, burnished, so as to produce a decided and sparkling effect against the dead gold surfaces.
>
> The large consoles to be painted in light bronze green, tipped with gold bronze and burnished gold, for the purpose of giving relief to the fruits and foliage.
>
> All the cases, the railings, and the remaining iron work to be finished with light gold bronze, tipped on all the parts which receive the strongest light with burnished gold.
>
> The wall to be frescoed in ornamental panels, corresponding with the rest of the work.[38]

Library of Congress, Looking North
ca. 1870

Although it does not appear as such in this view, the iron library sparkled with gold leaf highlights.

William De Lamano & Company of New York did the decorative painting and gilding in the iron library. (Later that year, De Lamano was hired to retouch the ceiling over the House chamber.) Work was begun in May 1853, and particularly warm weather made conditions in the room intolerable. Lest a breeze disturb the delicate procedure, windows remained shut while gilders laid on thousands of sheets of gold leaf. Somewhat aghast, the *New York Tribune* reported that men were compelled to work without wearing shirts. It also wrote that the room was hot enough for a Turkish bath.[39] Happily, the efforts of the bare-chested gilders were appreciated by the press and public. The brilliance of the plan and execution of the color scheme excited interest, and Walter was asked about the pigments and gold leaf used to achieve the effect that was so admired. In 1855, he told the editor of the *American Builder's News:*

> The pigments used were the best pure English lead, and the coloring matter umber, Roman ochre, and other ordinary pigments—the whole was ground in boiled linseed oil—The gold leaf was of the best quality—deepest shade—the bronze was what is usually called 'gold bronze.'[40]

In a letter to one of the owners of the foundry that cast the ironwork, Walter described Michael Raleigh's reaction to the room when he saw it for the first time. A native of Ireland who helped built Decimus Burton's Palm House at Kew Gardens near London, Raleigh supervised in New York the casting of each piece of iron for the library. Castings were done from drawings sent by the architect, and Raleigh had not seen the installation in Washington until it was completed. Although well acquainted with every piece of iron, he was not prepared for the splendor of the whole room assembled and decorated with paint and gold leaf:

> Raleigh has got through and is almost leaving for Gotham—I think his visit has been an effective

> one—I wish you could have seen him when the Library in its fullest blaze of noonday glory *busted* on his astonished vision from the little door where Meehan has been so often wont to anchor himself and feast his enraptured *peepers*—It was quite affecting to see how his eyes sparkled.[41]

The reconstruction was completed on July 1, 1853, and over the following weeks books and furniture were moved into the new room. In early August the president and his cabinet came to the Capitol to inspect Washington's newest attraction, taking Walter by surprise—he had invited the president but received no advance word of the visit. On August 10, 1853, he wrote an account of the sightseeing excursion to Charles Fowler, one of the partners in the Janes, Beebe company:

> Yesterday I went up to the Library to make some arrangement about covering the inner door, and to my surprise there was the whole cabinet with the President (except Judge Campbell) and they had been there an hour—the room was dirty; the furniture stacked up and covered, and every thing in uproar—I made the best of it I could—the President said he wrote me a note some time ago, and all I could say was, I did not receive it—This morning it came to hand by mail, having been 3 days in the post office.[42]

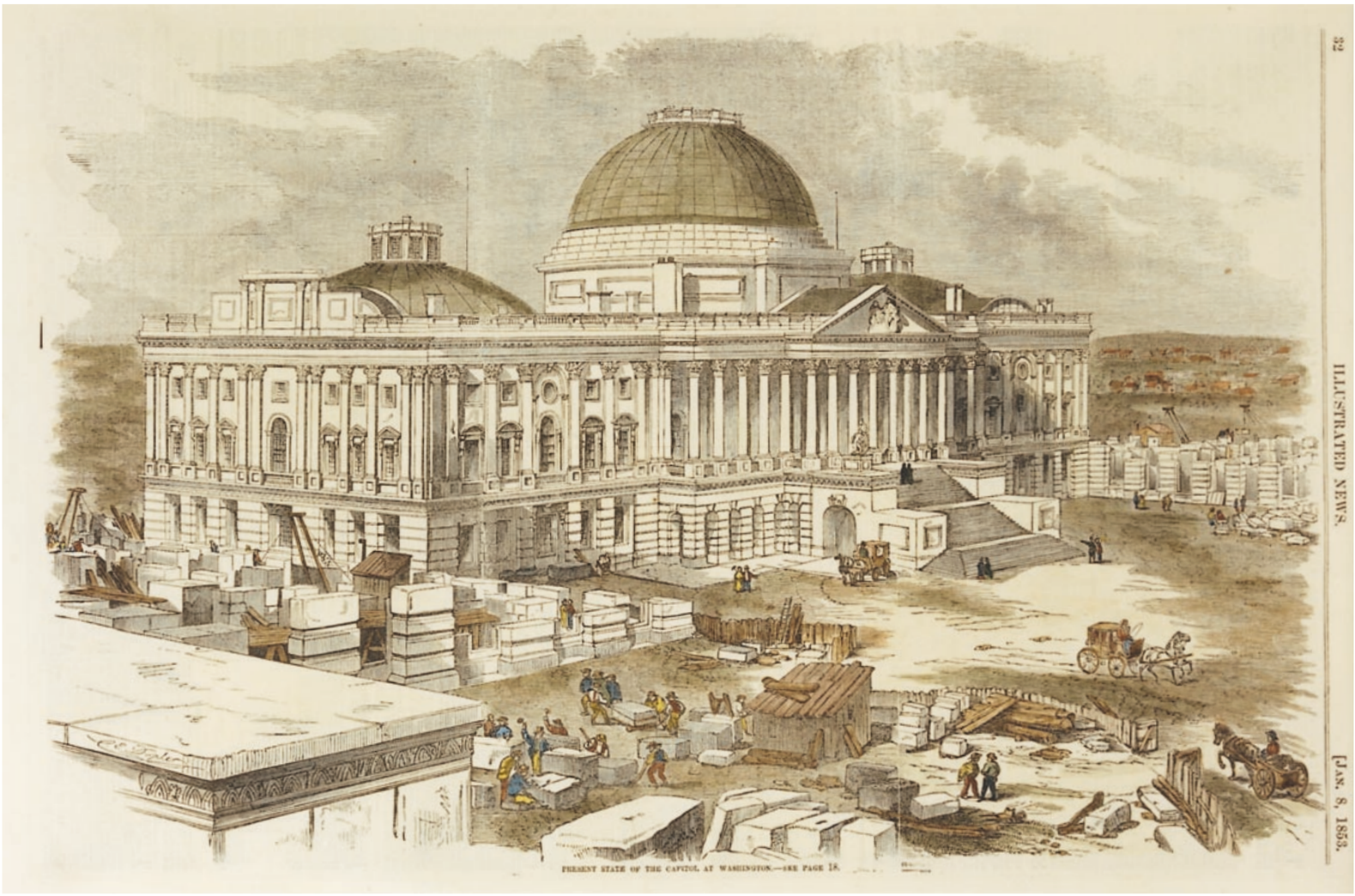
Less than two weeks later, however, the "uproar" had apparently quieted: the new Library of Congress was opened officially to the public on August 23, 1853.

AN ADMINISTRATIVE TRANSFER

The president who visited the library was Franklin Pierce, who had become America's fourteenth president on March 4, 1853. Handsome, gracious—and alcoholic—Pierce was elected partly because he was uncontroversial, having taken few stands in his public career that would anger partisans in the north or south. One of the more striking campaign slogans chanted by his Democratic supporters was: "We Polked you in 1844; we shall Pierce you in 1852!" Because of his inexperience, the president depended heavily on the cabinet, particularly Jefferson Davis, the secretary of war and the cabinet's most forceful personality. A month after taking office, Pierce agreed to let Davis control the work at the Capitol, transferring the extension project from the Department of the Interior and placing it under the War Department. (Meanwhile, the commissioner of public buildings, who took care of the old Capitol and grounds, remained under the Department of the Interior.) The transfer reflected Davis' long-held interest in the enlargement of the Capitol and was a partial triumph for Walter's Senate enemies led by Solon Borland of Arkansas.

Two weeks before Pierce's inauguration, Borland introduced legislation making the commissioner of public buildings the disbursing agent for the extension project. Commissioner Easby, unlike the architect, held an office created by law and had been confirmed by the Senate. In Borland's view, Easby was a vigilant public servant who exposed fraud and waste in Walter's management. The commissioner had first brought charges against Walter in a letter to Fillmore written in July 1852. He claimed the architect was using public money to purchase poor stone, which he called "the refuse of the quarry."[43] Walter refuted the accusation and the matter was dropped until Easby caught the eye of the senator from Arkansas. Borland had recently been named to a special investigative committee inquiring into abuses, bribery, or fraud in government contracts. Chaired by Sam Houston of Texas, the committee had been appointed under a Senate resolution passed on August 6, 1852. Although they looked into several different areas of illegal activity, such as blackmail in the navy, members of the Houston committee spent a good deal of time investigating the Capitol extension project. Over a period of weeks they took testimony from Easby and about thirty of his confederates, most of whom were dismissed workmen or disappointed contractors; Walter was not able to ask questions or otherwise cross-examine the witnesses. Some of the charges were minor, such as a story regarding Sam Strong's offer to pay some of the men to burn Senator Borland and Congressman McNair in effigy.

Easby's accusations were far more extensive. He testified that the marble contract with John Rice and John Baird would cost the government much more than necessary. Blocks of more than thirty cubic feet were being bought for $1.98 a foot and cut up into small blocks that would have cost only sixty-five cents. So far, the commissioner



Present State of the Capitol at Washington
***Illustrated News* (New York), 1853**

By the end of the Fillmore administration, the Capitol extension had risen just above ground level.

calculated, the government had been "fleeced of $44,326." The gneiss purchased for the foundations was bad, he asserted, and bricks were inferior as well. Easby claimed that Provost & Winter had a "private" contract in violation of the law and suggested that they must have paid $50,000 under the table to land such a deal. And so it went, Easby piling slander upon slander on Walter, while the architect sat silently in the committee room taking notes.

Other witnesses took the stand to grind their axes before Houston's committee. Some registered complaints against Sam Strong, telling tales about his extraction of money as a condition of employment, paying favorite workmen for labors never performed, or appropriating public material for private gain. Most of these complaints were unfounded, but a few did have merit. For example, a few masons sneaked their apprentices onto the public rolls, where their pay was more than their skills would otherwise command; once the deception was discovered the masons and their apprentices were dismissed. Also, and more damningly, Strong was accused of having an interest in the brick contract, a conflict of interest that caught Walter off guard. On November 18, after the truth

of the accusation became known, the architect accepted the superintendent's resignation.

Walter replied to the accusations against him in a manuscript covering 123 handwritten pages. Where fraud had been exposed, he supported prosecution of the villains. The charge of accepting unskilled workmen, which had some truth to it, was particularly galling to the architect who valued craftsmanship and hard work above just about every other virtue. Walter wrote: "I would have not suffered them to remain on the work a single hour had I known they were inferior workmen. The whole system of apprenticeships . . . was kept entirely from my knowledge until the men were dismissed this winter." These cases were rare, especially when it was considered that more than 800 men were employed on the Capitol extension. Responding to the baseless accusations—which were plentiful—Walter carefully, methodically, and forcefully rebutted them with facts and by revealing the disreputable motivations of his accusers.

Walter explained the history of the two marble contracts, showing the step-by-step process that led to hiring Rice & Baird (the suppliers) and Provost & Winter (the installers). Each step was taken with the approval of the president of the United States, the secretary of the interior, and the Committees on Public Buildings of the House of Representatives and Senate. If the contracts were illegal as Easby claimed, they reached that unfortunate status under the watchful eyes of some of the nation's most astute legal minds.

A similar history of the brick contract was given, and again the whole truth exposed Easby's accusations as groundless. Walter admitted that brick made by Christopher Adams was unfit, but it also had been rejected. The contract was assigned to another brick maker, who made improvements but still failed to come up to Walter's high standards. The contract then passed to a third brick maker, Byington & Company of Washington, which delivered very good bricks. Thus, the architect reported that the government now paid $6.37 per thousand bricks, which ordinarily cost eight dollars on the open market.

Workmen, stone masons, and contractors testified to the faithfulness of the work. President Fillmore and Secretary of the Interior Stuart wrote letters in response to questions posed by the committee. Strong said that he knew why the commissioner of public buildings held such a grudge against those in charge of the Capitol extension. He recalled Easby's son arriving at the Capitol one day with two loads of stone from his father's quarry. The stone had been rejected by builders of the Washington Monument and the younger Easby then tried to pawn it off at the Capitol. Strong inspected the stone and saw that most of it was hard, flinty, and shaped like pancakes. He refused to accept it. Strong concluded that "had Captain Easby's son had the furnishing of the stone from his father's quarries, these complaints would not have been made."

By the start of the 33rd Congress, Houston's committee had finished its work and on March 22, 1853, Senator Borland issued its voluminous report.[44] Despite Walter's explanations, the committee's conclusions were dictated by Borland's unexplained vendetta against the architect. It concluded that Walter's administration of the works was characterized by "great irregularities" and "gross abuses." Public funds had been spent wastefully and should be put under the control of another official.

Walter seemed to take the report in stride. Perhaps he knew of Latrobe's troubles and took solace in the fact that architects in public service are fair game for political sport. The sole recommendation made by the report was to take the disbursement of money out of the architect's control and place it in "more trustworthy hands." Exactly whose hands they might be was left to the president to decide.

On March 23, 1853, the day after Borland presented the Houston committee report, President Pierce issued an executive order transferring the Capitol extension project from the Interior Department to the War Department.[45] An officer of the Corps of Engineers would be appointed to exercise a "general supervision and control of the whole work." For the next nine years the Capitol extension and its architect would be governed by military rule.