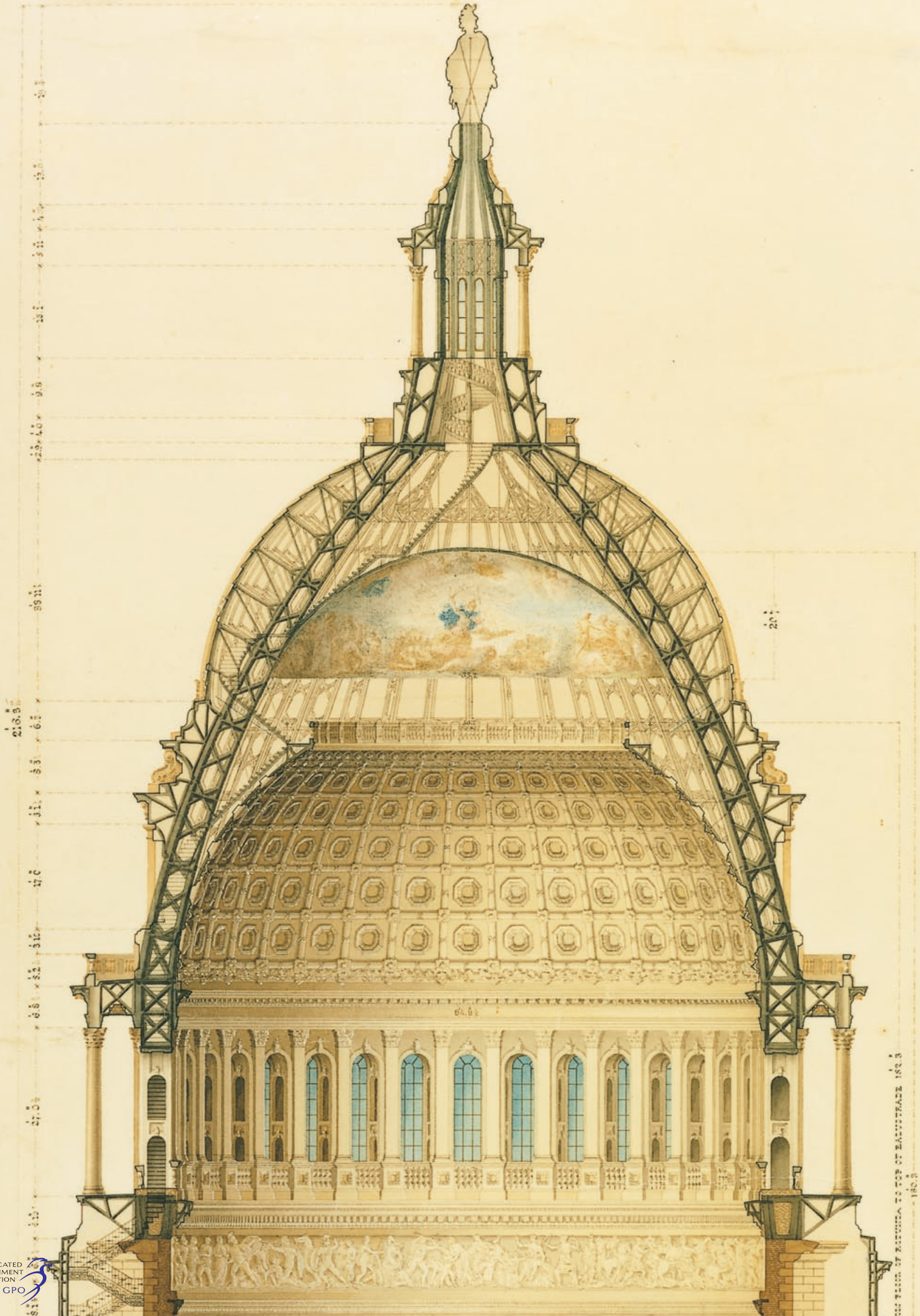


PRIDE AND STRIFE

As soon as James Buchanan was sworn in as president on March 4, 1857, senators and congressmen returned to their farms and offices, leaving the capital city to the small band of clerks and shop keepers who called it home. Captain Meigs had a foolproof way of knowing whether Congress was in town: if the streets were empty except for some carts and buggies—if there were no fancy carriages in sight—the lawmakers had left. While the streets were deserted, it was the busiest time of the year at the Capitol extension office. Meigs worked away on thousands of details relating to design, decoration, and construction, while Walter spent long hours at his drafting table. Their relationship had so far remained professional and cordial, but that would soon change. Meigs did not yet know that Walter was scheming to regain control of the design department, hoping to pull in the reins on the engineer's decorating frenzy.

Throughout the 1857 building season, Meigs drove the workmen to complete the House chamber in time for the opening of the 35th Congress in December. One of the biggest jobs was decorating the huge iron ceiling. Measuring 139 feet long by 93 feet wide, the ceiling was laden with decorative papier mâché moldings and pendants shaped like huge inverted pineapples. A central skylight was formed into forty-five panels glazed with colored glass made by the Gibson Company of Philadelphia. Described as having the appearance of enameled work, the glass included state seals copied by Johannes Oertel, an artist from New York. Meigs had difficulty finding accurate representations of the seals and was obliged to write officials in all the states and territories asking for authentic copies. He also borrowed from the House chamber an engraving of the Declaration of Independence that had a border made up of the seals from some of the older states.

Brumidi and a crew of painters began decorating the ceiling over the new House chamber at the end of 1856. Meigs provided some vague directions but mainly left the color scheme up to the artist's discretion. Strong, positive colors—red, blue, and yellow—were used with a generous sprinkling of gold leaf to ornament the intricate moldings with a degree of minute precision that was unlike anything seen before in American architecture. At first, Meigs thought the effect might be "too gorgeous," saying that "nothing so rich has ever been seen this side of the Atlantic."[1] He warned Brumidi not to make "too many little decorations" on the ceiling, but the result was a strong and varied application of bright colors and gold leaf that excited considerable comment.[2] Obviously impressed, *The Crayon* attempted to give its readers an idea of the ceiling's "surpassing gorgeousness." It claimed that the artistic effect was unequaled on the North

***Section Through Dome of U. S. Capitol* (Detail)**
by Thomas U. Walter, 1859

John B. Floyd

Daguerreotype by Mathew Brady
ca. 1858

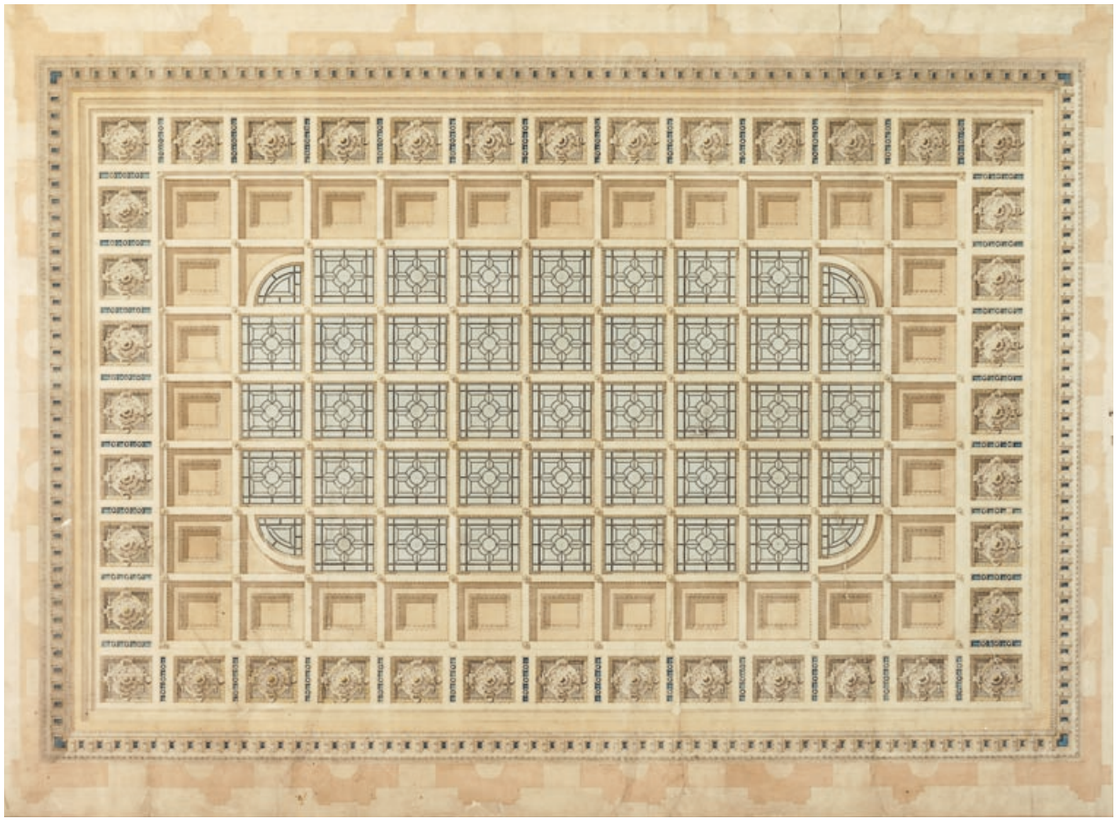
Library of Congress

In 1857 President Buchanan appointed Floyd (1806–1863) secretary of war. A former governor of Virginia, Floyd's principal qualification for the cabinet post was being from the south. He was a fierce Democratic stalwart who used his power to award the party's faithful and punish its enemies. He routinely used his position over the Capitol extension office to steer contracts and jobs to friends of the administration. For his unabashed corruption and partisanship, Floyd is remembered as one of the most incompetent cabinet officers in American history. His later career as a Confederate general was hardly better. His inept command of Fort Donelson contributed to its capture by Federal troops in 1862.

Plan of Ceiling of House of Representatives

by Thomas U. Walter, 1856

The iron and glass ceiling over the House chamber was its most elaborate feature. Artists highlighted the papier mâché pendants, moldings, modillions, and other ornaments using bright colors and gold leaf in a decorative treatment that excited considerable comment.



American continent and hardly matched anywhere in the world.[3]

Of course, not everyone approved of the color scheme. Senator Jacob Collamer of Vermont took exception to the use of so many bright colors and expressed his hope that the new Senate chamber would be spared a similar treatment:

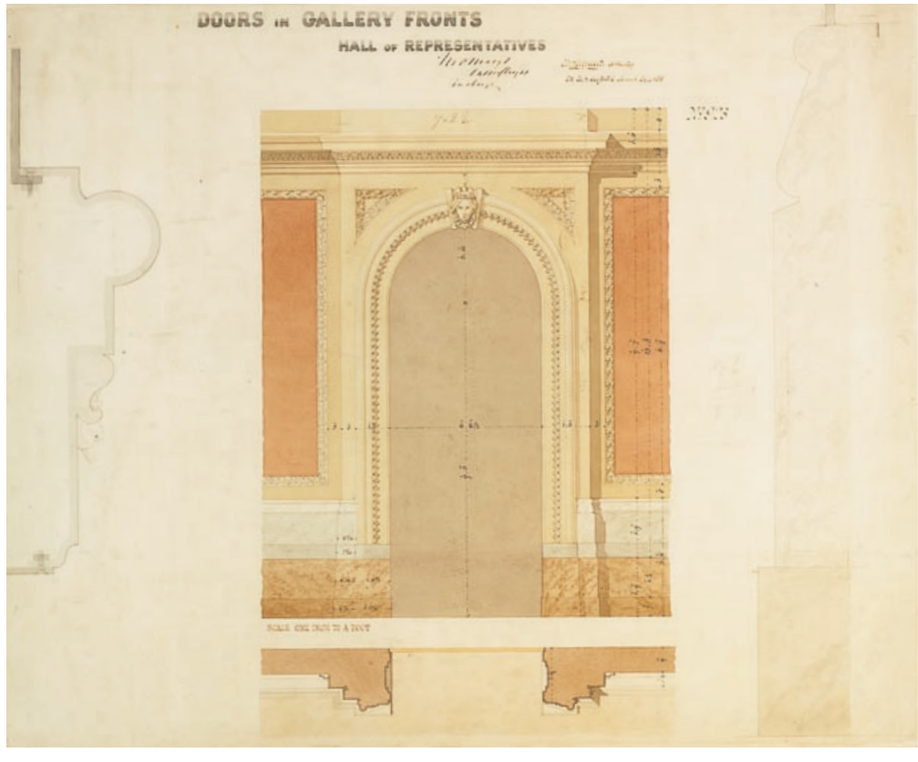
> I think the architectural character of the Representative Hall, as now finished, is entirely over burdened and disguised and thrown out of sight by the great variety of colors put in. I think it sort of Joseph's coat: and I desire very much that kind of thing may be kept out of the new Senate Chamber; and I believe that a large portion of the Senators entertain the same taste and feelings. If anything can be done by way of securing a little more chastity in it, I should desire it.[4]

Jefferson Davis, on the other hand, defended the polychromatic color scheme, claiming no special expertise in the matter but expressing complete faith in Brumidi's skill:

> Rub off the gilding and paint out the colors; make them all one, if the Senator from Vermont desire not to have many colors. . . . But there is not an artist who would attempt to ornament a building by painting with one color. His skill is shown in the harmony of the colors, blending them so that no one rests on the eye and commands its single attention. I would be surprised at the American Congress if it were to wipe out these great efforts of art and introduce as a substitute the crude notion of single color.[5]

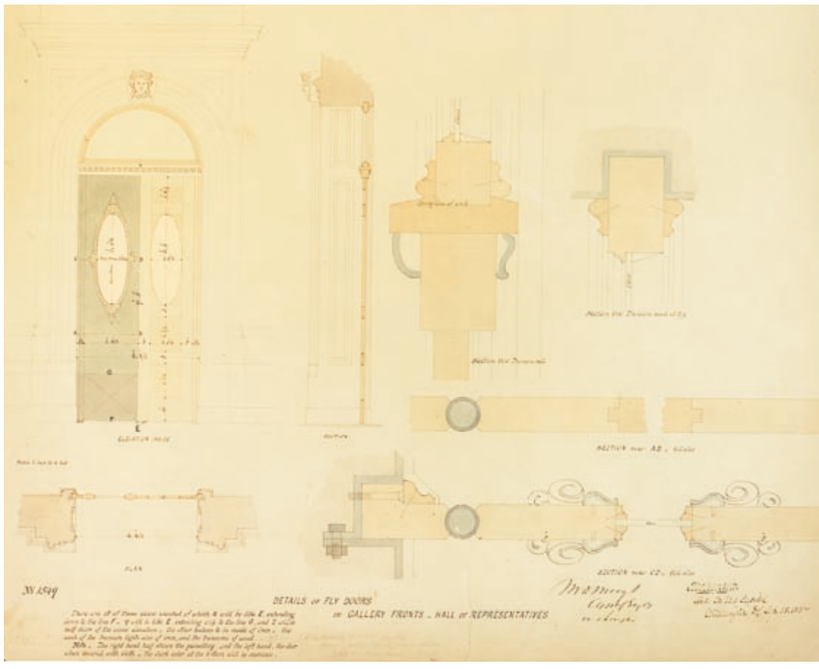
In March 1857, the Capitol's gardener granted permission to Meigs' chief bronze caster, Federico Casali, to pick all the flowers, leaves, and twigs needed to make metal ornaments to decorate the gallery doors in the House chamber. Twenty-four doors (seven of which were dummies) were made of baywood mahogany veneered with bird's-eye maple. Casali's small foundry produced figural and floral decorations that were used profusely on the gallery doors: cherubs, rosettes, acanthus, grapevines, rinceaux, masks, lizards, flies, beetles, and snakes. When the doors were opened, they recessed into the paneled jambs. Hung on the corridor side of the openings were double-leaf "fly doors" (swinging doors) that were made of red cedar covered with dark green baize held by silver plated tacks. Oval glass panels in each leaf were held by brass moldings. Fly doors were provided to allow access to the galleries without the noise and effort required to open and close the monumental mahogany, maple, and bronze doors. Below, fifteen doors gave access to the floor of the House. Each was closed by a pair of fly doors covered with red morocco with oval lights. The cast-iron frames were arched with clear glass transoms above the doors. Bronze sconces that were hung just below the spring line of the arch completed the rich decorative effect. These gas fixtures were formed into female figures with one arm outstretched, holding the burner, collar, and globe.

At the end of May 1857, Walter completed designs for members' chairs and desks. Meigs sent



Doors in Gallery Fronts
by Thomas U. Walter, 1856

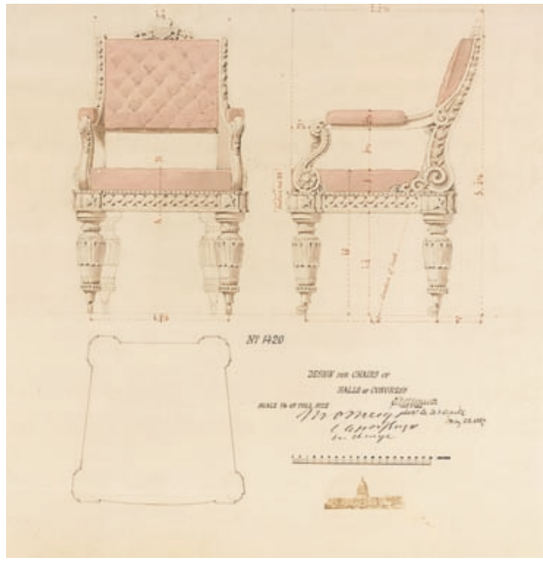
Sculpted female heads were intended to decorate the keystones above all fifteen doors leading into the House chamber. Only one, however, was fabricated and installed.



Details of Fly Doors in Gallery Fronts

by Thomas U. Walter
1857

The swinging doors were covered with red morocco to match the leather seats on the members' chairs.



Design for Chairs of Halls of Congress

by Thomas U. Walter, 1857

New desks and chairs were made for the House of Representatives just before its hall opened in December 1857.

a photograph of the desk design to Boston, where the Doe Hazelton Company was paid ninety dollars to make each of the 262 carved oak desks for the new chamber. The firm was too busy to make the matching chairs, so Meigs ordered half of them from Bembe and Kimbel of New York (at seventy dollars apiece) and the other half from the Hammitt Desk Company of Philadelphia (at seventy-five dollars apiece). The oak chairs, upholstered with red morocco matching the leather on the fly doors, had removable cushions to permit the cane seats to be used during the summer months. Meigs admonished the furniture makers to have the desks and chairs delivered to the Capitol by December 1 at the latest.

Seating in the galleries was constructed by carpenters working under their foreman, Pringle Slight. Before work began, Meigs needed to know the style of accommodations expected by the officers of the House. He wrote the clerk of the House, William Cullon, asking for guidance and offering his advice. He suggested that the gallery seats be cushioned in a red material. Spring seats were best because people would show respect and conduct themselves properly; wooden benches, on the other hand, would be "trodden" and "defaced" when the galleries were crowded.[6] Despite Meigs' counsel, the clerk did not wish to provide guests of the House with comfortable upholstered seats. The gallery benches were made of wood with the back rails and arms grained in imitation of mahogany while the seats and backs were simply painted and varnished.

Scaffolds in the House chamber were dismantled in mid-June while workmen were plastering the cloakrooms under the galleries. On June 21, the works were damaged by a violent hailstorm that broke thirty-five large sheets of glass in the skylight over the new chamber, while twenty-two sheets of glass broke over the Senate chamber. This thick glass had withstood the weight of workmen but shattered under the force of hailstones the size of eggs. Provost & Winter's marble cutting sheds lost 8,000 panes of glass while Meigs' shops lost 2,300 panes. The commissioner of public buildings reported that every skylight in the old Capitol was broken and the copper roof was damaged as well. Astonished by the severity of the storm, Meigs recorded that "chickens exposed were killed immediately. Cows and cattle ran about as if mad."[7]

Carpenters began laying the wooden floor in the House chamber on August 20, 1857. Their progress was interrupted when workmen ran out of materials, and Meigs went to the Campbell & Coyle sawmill to urge speedier delivery of lumber. By the end of the month, he was happy to report that work in the hall of the House was proceeding "bravely."[8] The floor was finished during the first week in September and awaited $1,800 worth of wall-to-wall carpet that Meigs had ordered from Clinton, Massachusetts. The clerk of the House felt that he should have been involved in the selection of carpeting, but since it had already been ordered he settled for selecting small accessories, such as spittoons.

From time to time Walter made inquiries about payments due the marble contractor, which Meigs thought was none of his business. The engineer warned him to stay clear of such matters, yet Walter secretly kept John Rice informed about every aspect of his business interests at the Capitol. On another subject, the marble contractors claimed they could not supply any of the exterior column shafts in a single piece. Their quarry could not fill the order as they once thought. Rice & Baird wanted to supply the shafts in four-foot drums, as allowed by their original contract, but Meigs insisted that the amended contract gave him the right to demand most—if not all—of the shafts in one piece. If they could not fulfill the contract, they would forfeit a 10 percent reserve withheld as a performance guarantee. Rice & Baird stood to lose $15,000.

In November 1857, Rice & Baird quoted the price of monolithic shafts at $1,700 each, $300 more than their contract allowed. (They would be obliged to purchase the stones from another quarry.) Meigs thought about sidestepping the firm altogether, ordering the shafts directly from Italy, and went to see the new secretary of war to discuss the matter. Floyd asked if it would be possible to substitute granite for marble shafts, an idea Meigs considered perfectly absurd. He reminded the secretary that the wings were faced with white marble, which would make granite columns look "rather dirty." Floyd then asked why the marble could not be removed and the wings refaced with granite, preferably granite from Virginia. Meigs said that Congress would never allow it because it would add five or six years to the project and cost an additional two million dollars. The foolish proposition was made, Meigs concluded, "only to get the money to go to Richmond."[9] Meigs' meeting left him thunderstruck. The secretary's proposal would not go far, but it spoke volumes about his motives and priorities.

Despite Floyd's shady dealings and crazy ideas, however, Walter wished he had more time to develop the secretary's friendship because he knew it would help improve his own situation at the Capitol. His control of the architectural department was steadily eroded by Meigs and his roster of artists and decorators, who provided various design services without the architect's knowledge. Walter was routinely left out of decisions that he felt should be made with his consultation. On May 4, 1857, for instance, he discovered that part of the architectural embellishments in the coffers over the ladies' retiring room in the Senate wing (modern day S–313) had been removed so that Brumidi could paint fresco pictures in their places. Walter complained privately that he had been ignored in the process and that the strength of the vault had been compromised. Meigs had Brumidi designing mantels and other conspicuous interior features, such as bronze railings for the four private staircases. All painted decorations were done without the knowledge or approval of the architect.

For a long time, Meigs did not sense Walter's unhappiness. But throughout 1857, Walter's private correspondence contained bitter complaints about Meigs' rule and his condescending attitude. He wished to return to the time when all the design work was generated in his office and the captain of engineers respected the prerogatives and role of the architect. Walter had once valued the way the captain lifted burdens from his shoulders, but he now grew tired of the autocratic way Meigs ordered, commanded, and lorded his power. He was weary of Meigs' insatiable appetite for fame, an obsession that gripped him like an addiction. He grew to detest Meigs' cravings for credit—credit for everything done under his rule, no matter whose intellectual property was stolen in the process. Walter's civilian ways were unavoidably at odds with Meigs' military disposition. Both were intelligent and cultured, but they were cut from very different cloth.

What had started as a cordial collaboration in 1853 degenerated into an icy relationship four years later. Walter wanted to stay with the extension and

dome until they were finished, but he wondered how much longer he could stand working under Meigs' rule. There were only two alternatives to resignation: the secretary of war could either muzzle Meigs or remove him. Walter wished to get to know Floyd better, but he found it unlikely given the demands of his work. To his most sympathetic correspondent, John Rice, he wrote:

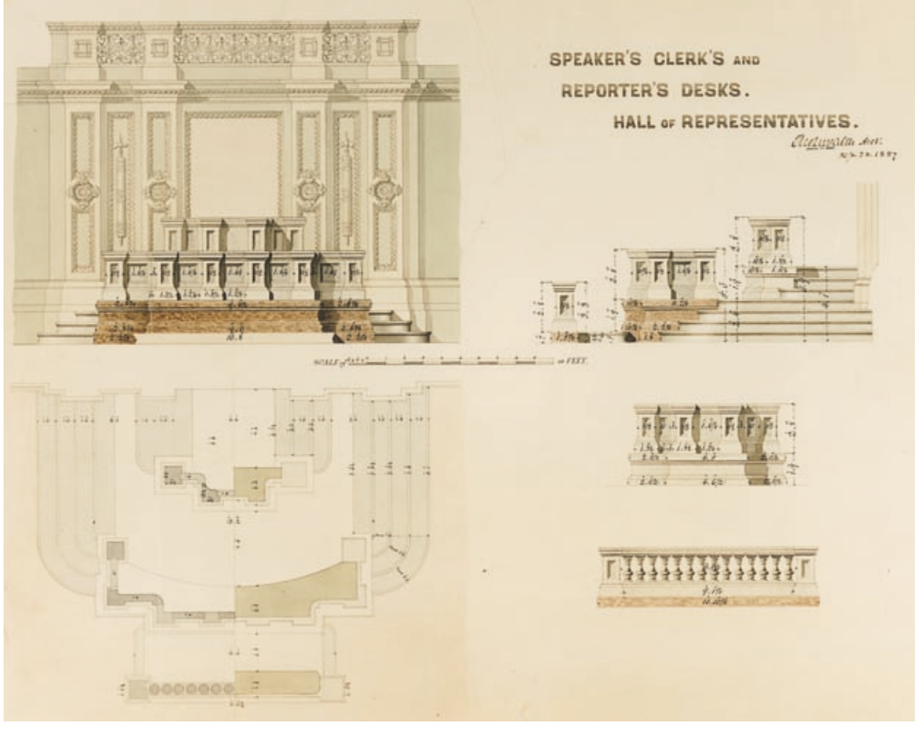
> I have not yet seen the Secy. of War and have heard nothing fresh in reference to our *friend* [Meigs]; he still flourishes in fancied security, and thinks that he has the confidence and the admiration and the affections of the entire cabinet; . . .
>
> I wish that I could get time to see the Secy. but I am driven from morning to night and from night to morning in keeping up my designs for 15 draughtsmen, and in answering letters, refer to documents, making calculations, and then looking personally after every thing, so that it is next to impossible for me to make myself agreeable to anybody, or to cultivate the friendship of cabinet officers—My dear Rice I am on a treadmill, and if I stop one minute I shall get my shins broke—This is not as it should be—an artist's brains should never be cudgeled—he should be the master of his own time, but under this reign that can not be—Tyranny and despotism is the order of the day.[10]

If Walter was unable to influence the secretary of war directly, he still had friends who had the leisure and the connections to do the job for him. William H. Witte, a former Democratic congressman from Philadelphia, was happy to help. Senator William Bigler, another Democrat from Pennsylvania, would also prove useful. Unfortunately for Walter, Joseph Chandler had lost his reelection bid and left the House at the end of the 34th Congress. (Chandler had not, however, lost clout with Buchanan, who appointed him minister to the Two Sicilies in 1858.) Walter's friendships with these influential politicians from Philadelphia would help him through the difficult times ahead. For his part, Meigs could depend on Jefferson Davis for support. In 1854, while in President Pierce's cabinet, Davis advised Meigs to dismiss Walter and claim the architectural honors for himself. At that time, the engineer replied that the architect was too valuable and said there was plenty of work and credit for both.[11] Soon, Meigs would regret his decision to keep Walter, but it is doubtful that either Davis or Meigs could have ordered Walter's dismissal on his own authority. He was, after all, appointed by the president of the United States, who was the only person who could fire him. Soon caught in the middle of these contentious forces were President Buchanan and Secretary Floyd, one old and indecisive, the other corrupt and devious.

Speaker's Clerk's and Reporter's Desks. Hall of Representatives

by Thomas U. Walter
1857

The chamber's focal point was the marble rostrum positioned in front of a cast-iron frontispiece.



THE OPENING SKIRMISH

Workmen swarmed over the new House chamber during the final days of November 1857 preparing it for the opening of Congress. Some of the ceiling glass had not yet arrived and Meigs feared that without it the room's opening would be delayed. But he thought everything else was ready. Walter, on the other hand, did not think the room would be ready for another six months. The heating apparatus was not finished, the stairways were still under construction, and thousands of little things needed to be done. Despite the "flourish of

trumpets of the superintendent," Walter did not believe the House would occupy the new chamber during the upcoming session.[12]

A former clerk of the House (and former and future commissioner of public buildings), Benjamin B. French, did not believe that the House would be in a hurry to occupy its new chamber, which he thought not nearly as tasteful as the old hall. He also felt the decorations of the new room were totally inappropriate for a legislative chamber:

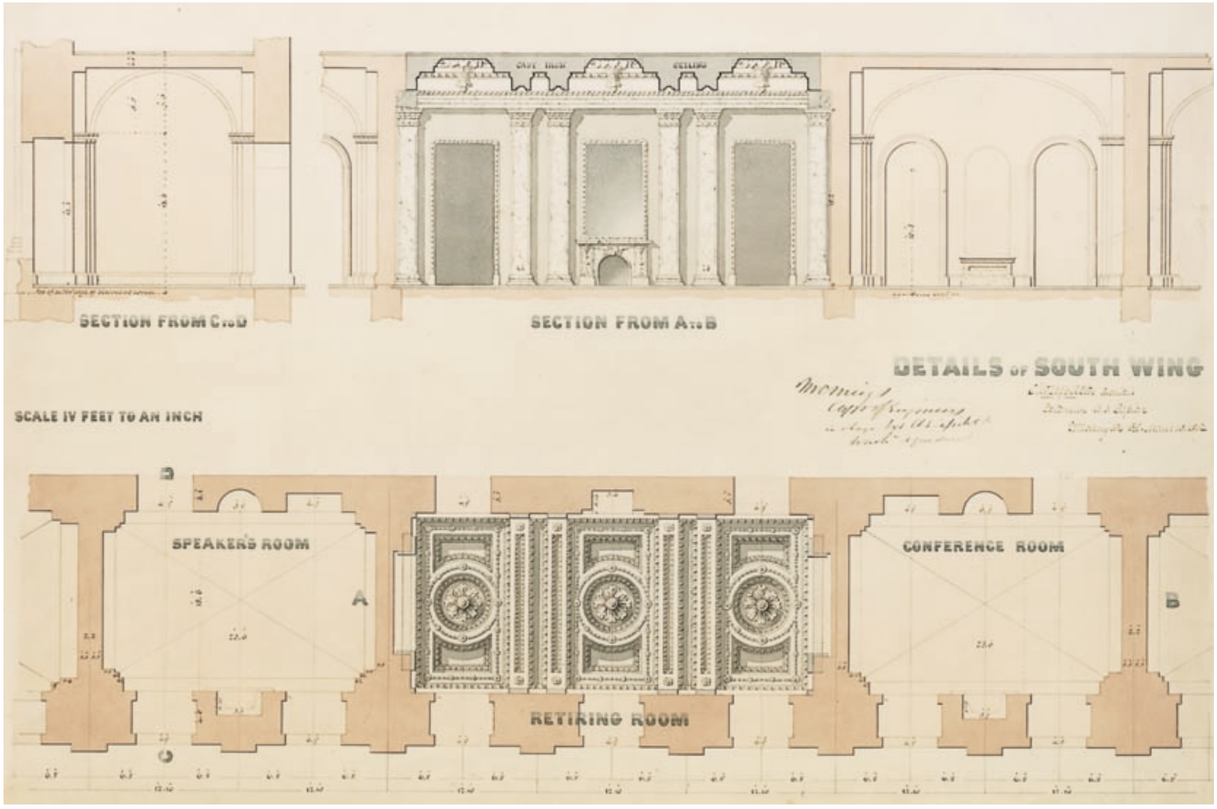
> The new Hall of the House of Representatives is nearly finished. Capt. Meigs has *rushed* the work upon it so as to show it to Congress. It will not probably be occupied by the House till May or June. It is a gorgeous affair—too much so, to my taste, for a business room. The ceiling is magnificent, & perhaps not too elaborately ornamented, but the gilding around the Speaker's chair, the doorways and panels looks, to my eye, tawdry & out of place, worthy only of a theater, lager beer saloon, or steamboat cabin! It is in very bad taste.[13]

On December 7, 1857, Meigs officially reported to the secretary of war that the new chamber was finished. Walter wrote Richard Stanton, then retired in Kentucky, that he considered the room far from complete. He also complained about Brumidi's color scheme, which, like every other decoration in the Capitol extension, was planned and executed without his input:

> The Capt. has taken upon himself to have all the painting and gilding done under his special direction without any consultation with me and I must say that it is the most vulgar room I was ever in—I hope Congress will order it repainted and allow your old friend to have some say as to how it shall be done—it is susceptible of being made as handsome and dignified a looking room as any in the world—

Details of South Wing
by Thomas U. Walter, 1854

Although labeled "Retiring Room," the center space was destined to become the Speaker's office in the new south wing. The ceiling was the most elaborate design that Walter created for cast iron—one of his favorite building materials.



Speaker's Room
Historical Society of Washington, D. C.

With striped slip covers on the furniture, this photograph shows the Speaker's office partially in "summer dress." Such seasonal housekeeping rituals were common prior to the advent of air-conditioning. (ca. 1860 photograph.)

Sconce in Speaker's Room

Among the few gas lighting fixtures surviving from the 1850s are the cherubic sconces located in what was the Speaker's office, now part of the members' retiring room. (1972 photograph.)

> now it is the very worst I ever saw—and so says everybody.[14]

Many people who saw the completed room before it was occupied agreed with Walter's assessment. Hearing that some of the public's reaction to the color scheme was unfavorable, Meigs wrote a letter to the *National Intelligencer* in which he attempted to defuse criticism:

> The style is new in this country where our public buildings generally, through the poverty of the public purse or perhaps the greater poverty of the architect's taste, starve in simple whitewash. This, new in this country, rich and magnificent decoration, naturally, when first seen, excites surprise. The colors are so rich, so various, so intricate, so different from anything seen before, that the impression is that it must be, what? Gaudy? But what is gaudy? Are the colors of the autumnal forests gaudy? Is there anything in this Hall more brilliant than the scarlet leafage of the gum or the maple, or the yellow of the oak and other trees? . . . This is a great work. Let not the noisy babble of ignorance forestall public opinion upon its merits.[15]

The heating system was tried for the first time on December 7 and seemed to work well. To test the acoustics, Meigs entered the empty room just after dark, climbed into the Speaker's chair, and began reading from a book; assistant engineers scattered in the gallery and on the floor listened and responded. Two days later, similar experiments were conducted by Meigs in the company of fellow members of the acoustical committee, Joseph Henry and Alexander Bache. Louisa Rogers Meigs sang a song in the chamber that greatly pleased

her husband. He wrote: "The effect of her magnificent and rich voice in this great chamber was beautiful."[16] At no time were there echoes, and the voice could be clearly heard in every part of the room. Meigs was confident that his scientific approach to the design of the chambers would make them the best rooms in the world for speaking and hearing.

A committee of the House was appointed to determine if the new room was ready for use. It sent for Meigs and asked him whether the dampness of fresh masonry might make it unwise to occupy the chamber right away. Using a hygrometer, the engineer proved that the air was dry and healthy. On December 13, 1857, the reverend Dr. George Cummins preached before a crowd of 2,000 worshipers in the first public use of the chamber. Soon thereafter, the committee recommended that the House convene in the new hall on Wednesday, December 16, 1857.

Workmen cleared the corridors around the new chamber, removed scaffolds, cleaned up, and polished everything to welcome the House of Representatives to its new home. A temporary passage was constructed between the old and new chambers, and Meigs proudly instructed the Speaker, the doorkeeper, and the clerk about the proper operations of the room. At noon on the appointed day, members of the House assembled in the room with spectators sitting on the hard benches in the gallery. Meigs was relieved to hear so few complaints, especially about the room's heating and ventilation. The few grumbles he did hear were of so little consequence that he paid them no attention. He noted: "It is no easy thing to warm 241 gentlemen so that each thinks himself just right, especially when they have been told that the Hall is damp and new, etc."[17]

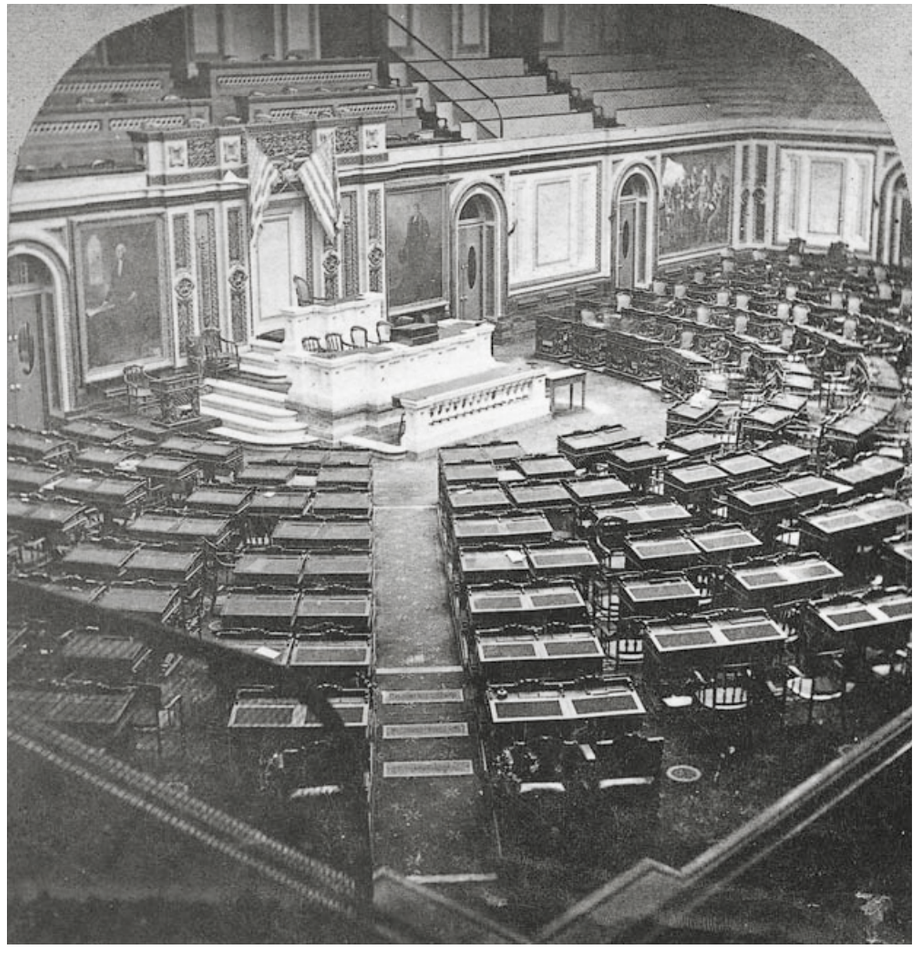
Benjamin B. French, who had not liked the hall when it was new and empty, did not like it any better when it was filled with congressmen. He described the conditions of the windowless room in a letter to his brother:

> I went over today and saw the House of Representatives down in their new cabin—for it seems as if you were in a monstrous salon—beneath deck. I don't like it at all, and in my opinion the House will adjourn back to the old Hall before two months! The idea of shutting up a thousand or two people in a kind of cellar, where none of God's direct light or air can come in to them—where they are breathing *artificial* air, and seeing the secondary light, is one that does not jump with my notions *of living*. And then, so far as comfort is concerned, the arrangement of the Hall is by no means equal to the old one. It is a piece of gaudy gingerbread work, that will in the end, do no credit to anyone who has had anything to do with it.[18]

In light of all the bad publicity Meigs was getting from early reviews of the chamber decorations, Walter felt it was time to reassert his rights to control the design of the Capitol extension. He would try to convince the War Department that both economy and good taste would be better served if he were given veto power over Meigs' expensive and gaudy decorations. He wrote a draft order on December 4, 1857, and it was delivered to the secretary of war by former Congressman Witte. They hoped Floyd would sign it, have it delivered to Meigs, and, thereby, restore the

House Chamber
ca. 1865

Flanking the Speaker's rostrum are the portraits of the Marquis de Lafayette and George Washington that originally hung in the old chamber. In the corner is Brumidi's depiction of the surrender of Cornwallis, which was intended to be the first in a series of history paintings for the wall panels.



Design for Clock for Hall of Representatives

by Thomas U. Walter
1858

To display a fine pair of bronze figures by William Rinehart, Walter designed a clock case that was then made in New York City by the Bembe & Kimbel furniture company. The crowning eagle was modeled at the Capitol by Guido Butti and cast in Philadelphia by Archer, Warner & Miskey. The clock was given the place of honor over the north door and thus occupied the same relative position as Franzoni's *Car of History* in the old hall.

proper lines of responsibility at the Capitol extension office. The draft read in part:

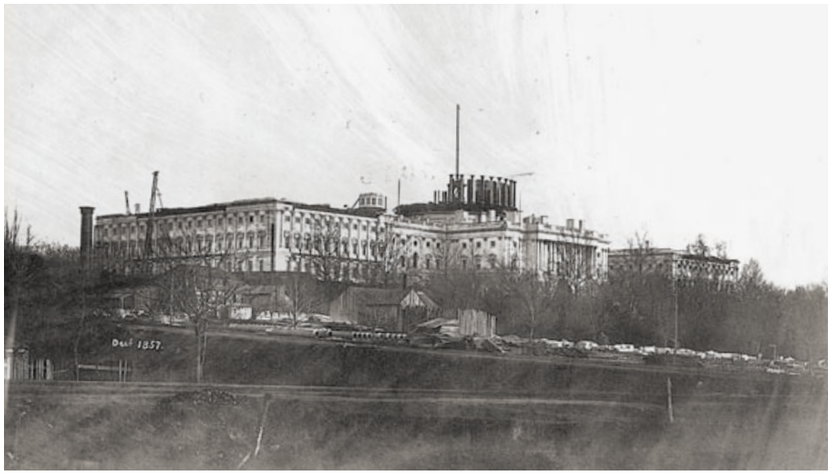
> No contract or order for any work upon the building under your charge is hereafter to be made for any alteration or work upon any plan differing from the original plan adopted, nor is any change to be made in the original plan, except upon a distinct proposition for such change of plan, concurred in and approved of by the architect and authorized by the Department.[19]

Day after day Walter waited to see what action would be taken by the War Department. He heard occasional rumors that the order had been issued, but these turned out to be untrue. Week after week, month after month Walter waited for the War Department to act: the waiting continued for two years.

On December 19, 1857, Meigs and Walter attended a meeting of the House Committee on Rules and Accommodations to discuss the ventilation system in the new chamber. The question of downward versus upward ventilation had been debated among Meigs and the assistant engineers and consultants for years, and Meigs was more convinced than ever that the downward flow of air was best. He was afraid that forcing air up from the floor would stir choking storms of dust and release the stench of tobacco odors from the carpet. He was quite satisfied with the effects of downward ventilation that had been demonstrated in the House chamber over the past three days. When asked for his opinion, Walter stated his objections to forcing hot air downward because it went against the laws of nature. He thought it was better to introduce warmed air from registers in the floor and to exhaust it through grills in the ceiling. This public disagreement with Meigs was most unwelcome and prompted a swift reaction. In front of a room filled with congressmen Meigs announced that the architect's opinions were of no consequence because he had nothing to do with the ventilation of the hall—he was not a "scientific man." Joseph Nason of Nason & Dodge, the heating and ventilation consultants, was also in attendance. Nason testified about improvements made by his firm to the Utica fan, which he claimed contributed to the success of the ventilation system. Meigs disagreed, claiming the improvements were his idea. All of the ventilating experiments were devised and paid for by Meigs and many of the ideas were Meigs' or came from men on his payroll. "It is a well-established principle that the engineer who takes the responsibility of ordering a particular work," he wrote soon after the meeting was over, "though he may not work out with his own hands its details, is entitled to the credit."[20]

The meeting was the opening volley in the public feud between the architect and the engineer. Walter dared to disagree openly with Meigs, who considered it nothing less than an act of insubordination. In response to the outrage, Meigs publicly insulted Walter, declaring him unfit to comment on scientific subjects. Considering his extensive experience, which included several large engineering commissions, Walter was deeply offended by the condescending, rude, and inappropriate behavior.

Two days after the encounter, Walter received a letter from the War Department asking him to suggest ways to economize at the Capitol.[21] It came with copies of two letters written by Meigs, in which he claimed to be the designer of the Capitol extension. Meigs did not say that he was the architect in so many words, but he asserted that the original designs were his and that they had been approved by President Pierce in 1853. Covering twenty-one pages, Walter's reply complained that Meigs'



Extension and Dome Construction
1857

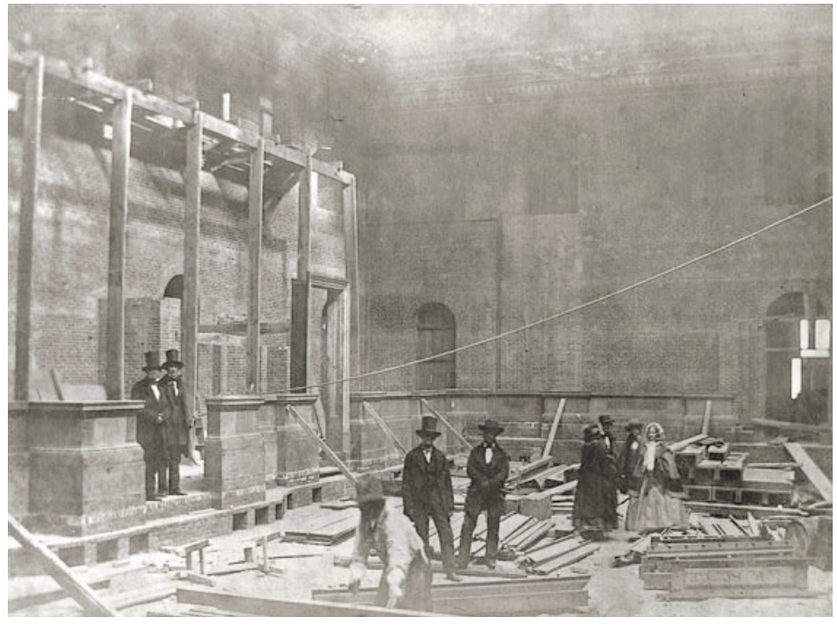
This photograph was taken about the time the House of Representatives moved into its new chamber.

extraordinary statements were "unjust to me, prejudicial to the interests of government, and in opposition to the tasteful and philosophical development of the arts of peace, in public structures." While freely admitting that the original plans were altered at Meigs' suggestion, he maintained that they were his nonetheless. Walter wrote that Meigs

> has not designed the Capitol extension, nor any other work on which I have been engaged with him; —he is not an Architect, —his calling is that of a Military Engineer, in which profession, I have no reason to doubt that he is eminent, and it is highly proper that he should wear the honors of that Profession; —but to assume that he designed the Capitol extension, and that I have been 'assisting' him, is nothing less than to assume to practice in a profession for which he has never been educated, and about which he knows no more than the generality of well educated men.

In the second letter, Meigs claimed that his design for the House chamber was based on scientific studies, particularly the science of acoustics, and that he deserved credit for its success. He implied that Walter's original design for the chamber would have been a failure, but the architect vehemently disagreed. Walter pointed to the fact that both rooms were nearly the same size and both were covered by a flat iron ceiling thirty-five feet above the floor. The ceiling designs, with elaborate moldings, pendants, and ornamental glass, were virtually identical in both cases and were of the same style and character as the ceiling over the Library of Congress. With the exception of windows, Walter said that what was "descriptive of my original plan of this room, is descriptive, in all essential particulars, of the present room."

While he awaited a reply to his long letter, Walter avoided seeing Meigs, who discovered that the architect was in "secret communication" with Floyd.[22] Even if the climate had been more hospitable, the engineer was too busy with members of



Senate Chamber Under Construction
ca. 1857

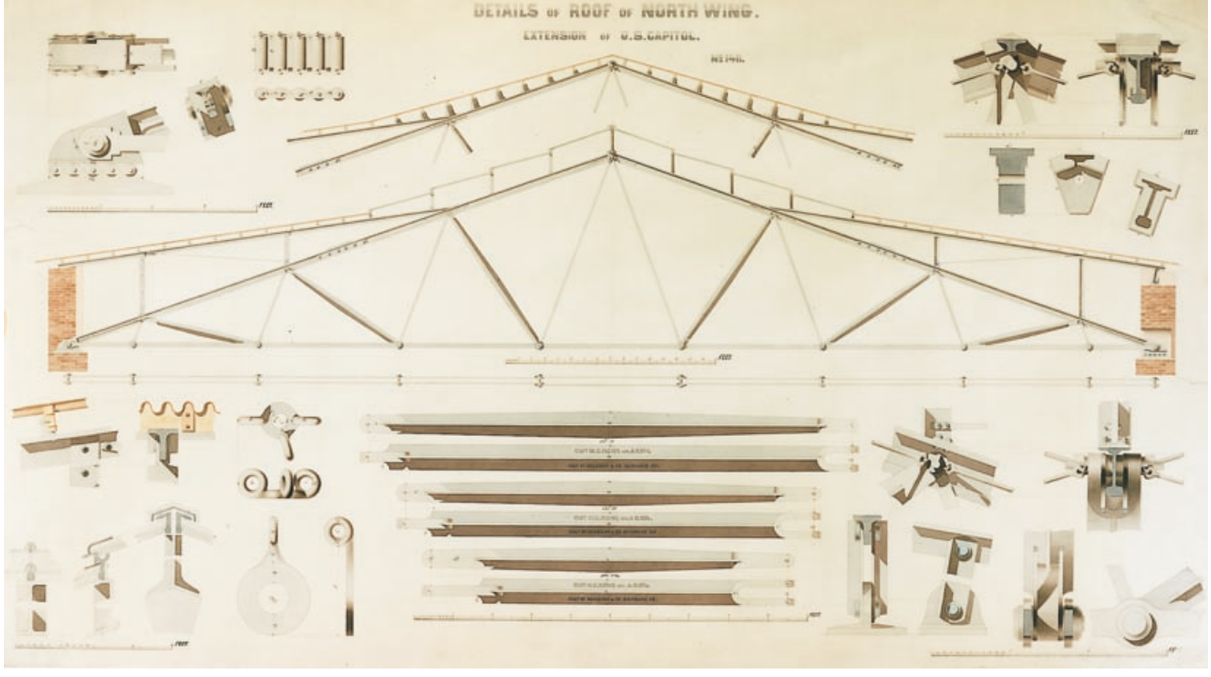
Congress to spare much time for the architect. Walter reported to Rice that "things have got so hot that I don't go near the fountain head anymore—M. is busy all the time, with members explaining his greatness and the unimportance of somebody else—he is vain to an extent amounting to insanity, bitter and vindictive."[23] A few days later Walter returned to his office after a brief absence and saw Meigs walk by with a "trail of senators after him headed by Jef. Davis." They did not stop, scarcely spoke, and seemed preoccupied with other business. He knew that Meigs was highly effective in bringing legislators to his point of view, and unless Witte could convince the secretary of war to act soon, Meigs would surely prevail. "Nothing can exceed M.'s industry, perseverance, sweet oil and soft solder," Walter wrote; "today [he] showed a deep seeded enmity on his part that can not be got over—this is the first time he ever looked belligerent."

In the war that was beginning over control of the architectural department, Meigs claimed the credit for the "original" design of the Capitol extension. Like everything else in this contest, there were two sides to the argument. By his commission from President Fillmore in 1851, Walter certainly had claim to the original design of the Capitol extension—outside and inside. Subsequent alterations to one aspect of the design—the floor plans—were suggested by Meigs, but they were worked out by the architect who had to solve many design problems to transform the suggestion into a workable plan. For his part, Meigs claimed credit for the wings as they were then being built. He reasoned that the changes to the floor plans resulted in an entirely new design for which he could rightly claim credit. He already claimed credit in letters to the War Department, which drew an angry reply from Walter. But Meigs came up with another strategy to bolster his claim. He sent for the revised plans bearing the signatures of Franklin Pierce and Jefferson Davis, and added the following title: "ORIGINAL REVISED PLAN—BY CAPT. M. C. MEIGS U. S. ENGINEER—ADOPTED BY THE PRESIDENT OF THE U. S. 27 JUNE 1853." The drawings were sent to the photographer's studio with an order to make copies. The photographer was also instructed to destroy the negatives of the drawings taken prior to the application of the new title. When Walter discovered this, he wrote Meigs a letter describing his astonishment at the methods used to establish his claim and asked him to "stop all further proceeding in

Details of Roof of North Wing

by Thomas U. Walter and Montgomery C. Meigs, 1857

This drawing for a roof truss included details of its multiple connections as well as elevations of the web members cast with Meigs' name as the "inventor." The name of the fabricator, Newsham & Company of Baltimore, was also cast into the ironwork.



reference to photography of these drawings and return them to my office, that I may restore them to the condition they were when approved by the President."[24] The drawings were returned only after Floyd issued an order to do so. Walter erased all or part of the new title from most of the drawings.

Meigs stayed home all day on January 21, 1858, writing a response to Walter's latest letter. In his view, it contained a "preposterous claim to the design for the alterations I made in his plans for the extension of the Capitol." He also wrote Senator Davis, enclosing a copy of his letter to the architect along with photographs showing the drawings in their altered and original states. Davis could be counted on to take the case to the War Department and the president. Meanwhile, the engineer confided to his journal that Walter had done nothing more than make the "drawings under my direction, in obedience to my orders, in accordance with principles which I first announced, and which he did not and does not yet understand."[25] Meigs wanted to place the contest before the War Department, the chief executive, the press, and the world, to force the administration to choose between him and the architect. Walter wanted the same thing. To Meigs, the credit for the Capitol extension was all he expected in return for five years of intense labor on the job. Earning only $1,800 a year as a captain in the U. S. Army, his financial rewards were meager, but the honor of building the extension made it all worthwhile. Take the credit away, and he would be left with nothing to show for a great deal of trouble.[26]

"LOOKING OUT FOR SQUALLS"

The contest between Walter and Meigs was played out in the shadow of the Kansas debate. Troubles in the Capitol extension office hardly compared to the troubles in Congress over the admission of Kansas as a slave state under its dubious Lecompton constitution. Led by territorial governor Robert J. Walker, a native of Mississippi, the constitutional convention held in the capital city of Lecompton had been boycotted by anti-slavery Kansans and, thus, drafted a document wholly along pro-slavery lines. The Kansas electorate was then allowed to vote on the constitution's article; with free-state forces again boycotting, the article passed easily despite its failure to reflect the will of the territory's majority. President Buchanan nevertheless supported the admission of Kansas as a slave state, but he was opposed in the Senate by Stephen Douglas, who noted that the Lecompton constitution was never ratified by a popular vote. Fueling the debate was the infamous Dred Scott decision handed down by the Supreme Court at the beginning of Buchanan's term. It ruled that Congress could not

North Corridor in Front of the House Gallery
ca. 1860

Bronze chandeliers suspended from saucer domes and sconces fixed to the iron window casings contributed to the corridor's sculptural effect.

outlaw slavery in the territories and declared that neither slave nor free blacks were citizens of the United States. Abolitionists were enraged, slave holders were emboldened, and Kansas was their battleground. There can be little wonder that such trifling matters as the differences between an architect and an army engineer failed to attract the attention that Walter and Meigs thought they deserved. While Congress and the administration did not ignore the Capitol completely, the nation was splitting apart and a resolution of the personnel problems at the extension office would have to wait—and wait.

The first session of the 35th Congress lasted more than six months—from December 7, 1857, to June 14, 1858. The Kansas issue dominated the session, but a few members also found time to look into matters relating to the Capitol, a diversion that was certainly less unnerving. On February 9, George Taylor, a representative from Brooklyn, introduced legislation in the House to establish a commission of outside experts to oversee completion of the Capitol. Since such a commission would oversee Meigs and curtail his power, the engineer assumed that Walter was behind it and asked friends in Congress to recast or kill the legislation.[27] Debate in the House did not question the wisdom of creating such a commission, but there was some confusion about which committee should handle the bill. Eventually, the legislation was referred to the Committee on Public Buildings, where it died. But the idea of creating a commission to curtail Meigs' decorations had been established and would resurface in a slightly different form at the end of the session.

As the session wore on, Walter and Meigs continued on their separate ways. The engineer juggled his jobs building the Capitol extension, dome, aqueduct, Post Office extension, Patent Office extension, and Fort Madison while making sure his political base remained strong and his profile high. The architect kept working at his board, producing drawings that he retained in his office for fear of "mutilation," his term for changes Meigs was prone to make. Without drawings, construction slowed to a crawl, particularly on the new dome. Walter kept up his extensive correspondence with friends and business associates, telling them how difficult things were at the Capitol and what a bad man Meigs was. Walter had not seen Meigs for about a month when he wrote John Rice about the logjam at the office, with unpaid bills stacked up waiting for the captain's signature. Provost & Winter had been waiting for a large payment for two weeks and "can't get a cent." The iron men were in the same situation and were unhappy. Meigs moved his office back to the rooms over the Adams Express office on A Street north and ordered Walter to follow. Seizing the opportunity, Walter asked and received permission from the secretary of war and the Speaker to move his draftsmen to an empty committee room on the third floor of the center building (probably modern day H–328). There, in a fireproof office, he could store the drawings safely and guard them against unauthorized changes. Meigs viewed the move as a robbery of documents from the office and Walter as the thief. Unsuccessful attempts were made to take the drawings from the architect's control, and the War Department permitted Meigs only to examine the drawings in Walter's office and to take away copies of those needed. But the engineer would not go there under any pretense, and he would not acknowledge Walter's right to control anything as important as the architectural drawings. Thus, the drawings piled up in the architect's office.

Because he had no direct contact with the engineer or his clerks, Walter gained his knowledge of business matters through spies and rumors. A typical report that he sent to Rice about the chaos in Meigs' office also contained some of the most vivid language used by this Baptist Sunday school teacher:

> P[rovost] says that Denham remarked that things were in a very bad state, that every thing in their office was unsettled & in confusion, and that he couldn't get the Capt. to attend to anything—I guess he is half right—the Capt. hangs on in the face of the bitterest opposition of his chief, with all around him at enmity to him, nobody caring for him, every body wanting him away—he is a perfect excrescency—a nightmare on the public works, and still he sticks—he is the most immodest, indelicate man I ever heard of—I don't believe he ever intends to go.
>
> W[itte] was here yesterday, but he had no news; he said that they were waiting until the Kansas matter was settled before they made a move—they are better at *waiting* than at any thing else.[28]

Walter copied relevant correspondence and sent it to the War Department, where it would be

available in case Senator Bigler needed it for a speech. Walter would have no objection if Secretary Floyd took a look at it himself. Meigs learned of this from Charles Heebner, a partner in the Rice & Baird marble firm, who told the engineer that Bigler intended to read some of the letters before the Senate. Meigs, in turn, went to see Alexander Bache of the Coast Survey, who told him that there was support for his position in Philadelphia and that he could "get any quantity of help to fight this battle" by merely making it known that he needed some.[29] Senator Davis was sick, and unable to respond to Bigler in the Senate, so Meigs intended to recruit James Pearce to man that defensive position.

It was remarkable that so many players, so many parties, and so many alliances formed around the two combatants. The idea of tapping into the political machinery of Philadelphia to help win the contest over control of the Capitol in Washington suggests how widely felt the dispute was. It was not confined to the local press or the gossip of local drawing rooms. Rather, it was a competition with a national audience—not as exciting or as important as slavery in Kansas, of course, but wonderfully tantalizing nonetheless. Struggles among strong wills always attract spectators, who usually care more for the entertainment than for justice. The case of Walter versus Meigs was a worthy successor to the Latrobe–Thornton battles waged a half century earlier.

During this period of administrative contention, physical violence was also common in and around the Capitol. A workman was killed while crossing the grounds late at night on March 27, 1858, shot dead by an assassin who shouted politically charged epithets at his victim. Two weeks later, John A. Gilmer, a member from North Carolina, had an encounter with Burton Craig, another Tar Heel, as the House prepared to adjourn for the funeral of Thomas Hart Benton. What sparked the fight is unknown, but it probably had something to do with Gilmer's strong anti-slavery views. Craig, a stout man over six feet tall, lunged at Gilmer, himself a large man weighing more than 200 pounds. By the time they were separated, and before any injuries were inflicted, Craig was discovered to be armed with a revolver and a Bowie knife. Both men left the hall unharmed.

Perhaps the chilling memory of the brutal caning of Massachusetts Senator Charles Sumner by South Carolina Congressman Preston Brooks helped restore civility between the two representatives. That incident, which took place on May 22, 1856, was one of the most violent ever to take place inside the Capitol. Sumner delivered an inflammatory address denouncing the "Crime Against Kansas," during which he condemned the south as the "harlot of slavery." Soon after the speech was over, Brooks went to the Senate chamber, found Sumner at his desk, and proceeded to beat the senator senseless with a cane. Sumner was unable to resume his seat in the Senate for three years. For his defense of the southern cause Brooks became the darling of the region (hundreds of admirers sent him canes as gifts), while Sumner rose from relative obscurity to become a hero of northern abolitionists.

At the end of April 1858, Walter reported that things around the Capitol were rather dull, the work virtually stopped. He had not seen Meigs for quite some time, nor had he seen Witte or the secretary of war. "Am just holding on from day to day," he wrote Rice, "looking out for squalls."[30] Some of his leisure time was spent writing about his troubles and damning the captain of engineers with a warmth that places him among the greater talents of that genre. On April 19, 1858, for example, Walter wrote

Dome Construction
1858

By the time this photograph was taken on May 16, 1858, all of the columns for the dome's peristyle had been put into place.

Private Stairway, North Wing

Two private stairs in each wing offer the most direct route to the chambers from the first floor. When they were new, the railings were admired as unsurpassed works of art. (1996 photograph.)

a long overdue letter to a friend who was a Baptist minister living in Uniontown, Pennsylvania:

> I am under, probably, the most tyrannical, despotic, vain, and unscrupulous man the world ever saw, viz Capt. M. C. Meigs—he seeks to rob me of every thing he can to pamper his own vanity; to check me in all my works because I will not allow him to have credit for what he had no more agency in producing than you had—He is a shallow brained pippenjohn with epaulets and brass buttons claiming to be architect, painter, sculptor, philosopher, and a thousand other things about which he is wholly ignorant—he insults and vilifies me in every way he can because I will not concede to him all knowledge . . . he is so contemptible that I have refused to speak to him for months past, and had I not had the promise of those in power that he should be speedily removed I should have resigned long ago—I am daily looking for his removal, and if it don't come soon, I shall go myself, so you see I have been in no humor to write.[31]

On April 17, 1858, Meigs authorized Randolph Rogers to have his Columbus doors cast in Munich. One week later he went to the Senate wing to supervise the installation of the first of four bronze railings cast by Archer, Warner & Miskey of Philadelphia. The general outline of the railings was drawn by Brumidi in 1857, but the models for the various components were sculpted by Edmond Baudin. Earlier that year Meigs had visited the foundry, seen the sculptor at work, and been glad he was working from good natural models. One reluctant model was a buck that had been boxed up and transported to the fourth story of the building where Baudin had his studio. The animal stayed three weeks and gave his handlers quite a fight both coming and going. Other models included snakes borrowed from the Academy of Science.[32]

Bronze Eagle

Edmond Baudin, a French sculptor working in Philadelphia, modeled this fierce looking eagle for the bronze stair railings about 1857. Deer, birds, snakes, and cherubs were also incorporated into the design. (1977 photograph.)

THE POLITICS OF PAINT

As the congressional session wore on, time did little to mute criticism of the color scheme in the House chamber. Meigs usually dismissed such reviews as signs of ignorance, but he could not turn the tide of public opinion in favor of what many considered vulgar, tawdry, and gaudy colors. On May 19, 1858, a petition from 127 American artists was presented to the House. Signed by such well-known painters as Rembrandt Peale, Thomas Sully, and Albert Bierstadt, it was aimed at placing control of the Capitol's decorations in the hands of an art commission. On the day the petition was presented, Owen Lovejoy, an abolitionist Republican from Illinois, and Humphrey Marshall, a West Point graduate and a member from Kentucky, attacked Meigs' handling of the interior decorations. Lovejoy sarcastically evoked Christopher Wren's famous epitaph at St. Paul's Cathedral—*"Si monumentum requiris, circumspice"* (If you seek his monument, look around)—when asking his colleagues if they wanted to see a monument to military architecture. "Look at the meretricious and garish gilding of these walls," Lovejoy declared, "and the splendid specimens of fresco painting in these panels. And then go down into the Agriculture Committee room—at one end is a representation of Old Put leaving the plow; and at the other is Cincinnatus, also leaving his plow."[33] He thought that the decorations of the Agriculture Committee room should illustrate the current state of agriculture in America. In the ceiling he saw Brumidi's cupids, cherubs, and other images from "heathen mythology" and regretted that valuable breeds of cattle, sheep, and horses had not been painted instead. Lovejoy thought the worst part of the room's decoration was the lack of anything to do with corn. The absence of this American staple in the committee room was a great shame:

> A panel ought to have been given to this single production. It should have been represented in the different stages; as it emerges, weak and diminutive, from the ground; as it sways in its dark luxuriance in June and July; and then as it waves its tasseled crest, like the plumes of an armed host; and last, in its rich golden maturity.[34]

His poetic side soon gave way to a cynical suggestion that the picture of Israel Putnam would better suit the Committee on Revolutionary Claims. Its place in the Agriculture Committee room should be taken by a "picture of a western plow, with its polished steel moldboard, with a hardy yeoman." This image of free labor should be made to contrast with an ugly view of slave labor and thus show "the two systems of labor now struggling for the ascendency."

Lovejoy's speech was followed by extensive remarks from Congressman Marshall about an appropriation for the extension and the wisdom of forbidding Meigs to use any of the money to pay for decorations. He offered an amendment to prohibit any part of the appropriation from being spent on painting or sculpture unless the design were approved by a committee of American artists appointed by the president.[35]

Marshall's amendment grew out of the earlier proposal to establish a commission of outside experts to oversee completion of the Capitol extension. But the current legislation was limited to an art commission to oversee decorations. In his remarks, Marshall pointed to the empty niches in the gallery walls and warned that unless steps were taken they would soon be filled with statues commissioned by Meigs without anyone in Congress knowing anything about whom or what the statues would represent. He then pointed to the lone fresco in a corner panel that Brumidi had quickly painted just before the hall opened, a disappointing work entitled *Cornwallis Sues for Cessation of Hostilities Under the Flag of Truce,* and promised that additional "daubs like that" would be precluded by an art commission.[36] Meigs had not been pleased with the picture either, and he claimed it was only an example of the kind of art he wanted to see placed in the chamber. But Marshall took Brumidi's work as an ominous sign of things to come, as a threat of bad and distracting pictures placed in the chamber against the will of Congress.

The amendment creating an art commission failed on the first try but was successfully resurrected a few days later. Working on behalf of the commission were several artists who had tried and failed to land contracts with Captain Meigs. Horatio Stone and Henry Kirke Brown were two sculptors whose friends in Congress were behind the scheme to take control of the decorations away from Meigs.

Their motives were partly revengeful, partly pecuniary, and partly a disagreement over such matters as good taste and what constitutes American art. In the Senate, Meigs' faithful ally from Mississippi sought to replace the art commission with a generous appropriation to acquire works of art through the Joint Committee on the Library. Davis was against forming an art commission because it was an insult to Meigs, who was faithfully implementing the style of finish adopted by the Pierce administration. He recalled the days when, as secretary of war, he encouraged the highly decorated interiors, made the decision to cover the walls with fresco painting, and endorsed paving the floors with encaustic tiles. No formal vote was taken in Congress to officially approve such a course, but Davis said he received every indication that he and Meigs were on the right course:

> An opinion was sought from Congress. It was not given by any vote, but it came to me in every other form that they wanted the building finished in the very highest order of modern art. One expression I recollect distinctly, because it was very striking, that Brother Jonathan was entitled to as good a house as any prince or potentate on earth, and generally that they wanted the best materials and the best style of workmanship and the highest order of art introduced into the Capitol of the United States.[37]

Sam Houston of Texas took the floor in opposition and entertained the Senate with his homespun views about the sculpture destined for the pediment, which he mistakenly assumed was the work of a foreign artist. It was a long, extemporaneous talk frequently interrupted by hearty laughter from everyone but Davis. Houston had particularly harsh words for Crawford's personification of America, whose painful attitude seemed to indicate that she suffered from a boil under her arm. Then there were her shoes, "a very formidable pair of russet brogans, that would suit very well for laborers in the swamps of the South." He was taken aback by an Indian child whose neck was not big enough to hold its head. The child's head reminded him of a terrapin or an apple on a stick. Houston thought that works of art should "inspire cheerfulness and pleasure. Instead of that, a contemplation of this figure will inflict agony on every human being of sensibility."[38] And so it went until every figure in *Progress of Civilization*—and some miscellaneous others—was lampooned with Houston's amusing brand of criticism.

In the House, debate often centered upon the issue of decorations and ways to stop Captain Meigs' artistic pursuits. The idea of an art commission appealed to some members, while others simply wanted a blanket prohibition against any more art. Representative Taylor of New York, who had originated the notion of a commission at the beginning of the session, now wanted to cut off funding altogether, saying the two wings were so far advanced that any more money would be used only for decorations. The less money available to Meigs, he declared, "the better for us, the better for the Treasury, the better for the artistic taste of the country."[39] He called the decorations "contemptible"

Plaster Models for *Progress of Civilization*
by Thomas Crawford

The first models of *Progress of Civilization* were shipped from Rome at the beginning of 1855 and carved by Italian sculptors working in the Capitol's marble yard. Eight years later the figures were installed in the Senate pediment. Seen here are the figures of the schoolmaster and child, two youths, the merchant, and the soldier. The models were put on display in the old House chamber in June 1859. (ca. 1859 photograph.)

and "disgraceful to the age and to the taste of the country." Taylor insisted that if his colleagues did not believe him, they should inspect the extension themselves:

> Go through this Capitol and see the insignificant tinsel work that has been prepared here to stand for ages as a representation of the taste and skill of the age. Have we no artist to illustrate the history of our country? Can we not write some portion of our country's history on these walls that will perpetuate the character of the present generation? Have we no commerce to illustrate—no history to perpetuate? Have we made no mechanical, no scientific discoveries worthy of record here, that we are compelled to employ the poorest Italian painters to collect scraps from antiquity to place upon these walls, as a lasting disgrace to the age—mere tinsel, a libel upon the taste and intelligence of the people.[40]

Muscoe Garnett of Virginia thought that Meigs himself was at the heart of the issue, and rightly so. He had not been a member of the House for long, but he had served in the new chamber long enough to call it a "sarcophagus for the living." He observed that members were

> inclosed in a vault, breathing a poisonous atmosphere, and suffering the close heat of an oven. . . . Again, what is the style of the adornment of this Hall? It is gingerbread and tinsel work. The attempt to defend it by talking of the harmony of colors and the polychromic style, is absurd. It is unjust to that style, which it does not illustrate, but caricatures.[41]

While many House members considered the appropriation and the various amendments as a referendum on Meigs' success at architectural decorating, few attacked him personally. Most recognized that he was a faithful public servant but felt he was engaged in a field for which he was not well suited. Humphrey Marshall of Kentucky, for instance, said: "I do not desire, sir, to attack the engineer who has charge of this work. Although I do not consider him a Phidias, or a Michael Angelo, I do not want to attack him. But I do not want to see the work of embellishment progress as it has gone on."[42] On June 7, 1858, the House agreed to prohibit any part of the appropriation from being spent on works of art unless approved by an art commission composed of three members appointed by the president. In the Senate, Davis inserted a clause to allow sculpture by Crawford (being sent from Italy by his widow) and Rogers to proceed unaffected by the new provision. President Buchanan signed the bill into law on June 12.

During the debate Meigs had not sat idly by. His defense was played out in the newspapers that printed anonymous articles written by the engineer, who signed himself "M" or "A Private Amateur." To answer charges that foreign artists were giving the Capitol a foreign look, he told the reader that "the encouragement of art by works of the Capitol has been the care of the superintendent from the beginning. . . . All these are due to the foresight and careful provision of Capt. Meigs and of him alone."[43] In other words, the fact that there was fine art in the Capitol extension at all was thanks to Meigs. And he did not care where an artist was born as long as his talent justified employment:

> The point that is made of neglect in employing American artists is unfounded and unjust. He [Meigs] has a national pride, and is gratified when he can assist native talent, and is not likely to overlook it when the public interest will be benefitted. It matters not where an artist is born: that is beyond his control. At an age of maturity, if he seeks our nation and becomes one of us, and desires that his talent shall be exerted in decorating our edifices, that his works may remain in the country where his children reside and will deposit his bones, he should be encouraged. Our artists will readily perceive that advantage of employing the best talent, and they will improve by the lesson thus inculcated.[44]

Pleading the case of the American melting pot and suggesting that American artists stop complaining and start learning from foreign artists were hardly effective arguments. These newspaper articles and the backing of Senator Davis were not enough to stop Congress from putting an end to Meigs' grand plans for interior embellishments. If Meigs felt the sting of a congressional rebuke, he suffered in silence.

Walter, too, had closely monitored the actions in Congress. Since the War Department had not acted, he was pleased that Congress did. He read Meigs' newspaper articles with a tinge of disbelief. While these pieces were naturally self-serving, the vanity of Meigs' writings prompted Walter to remark:

> Meigs is out in the Intelligencer in an article in which he proves to the satisfaction of *himself* that he is the greatest man that ever lived—the inventor of every thing good that ever has been invented, the designer of the pivots upon which

the world revolves—I wonder that he don't order old Vulcan to stamp his name on the thunderbolts—the wheelbarrow man affects to believe it to be satire—but it is not *satire*—it is the candid opinion of a man about himself.[45]

After Congress created the art commission, Meigs' freewheeling days as a decorator were over. Nonetheless, Walter continued to press for his removal. The conflict between the two ran far deeper than brushes and paint. Too many insults had been hurled, too much pride had been wounded, and too many feelings hurt to ever hope for reconciliation. With so much work to do at the aqueduct, troubles at the Capitol barely affected Meigs' daily routine. But every day Walter hoped the War Department would remove Meigs and assign someone else who would not meddle in design matters at the Capitol. He held on by the promise that a resolution was forthcoming. His frustration is evident in a letter he wrote to John Rice soon after the city emptied at the close of Congress:

> I am out of all patience with the delay, the procrastination—the *"next week"* talk—B[igler] ought not to have left Washington until he saw the matter through,—if he had gone to the Prest. explained the matter to him, and based the continuation of his support of the administration on the removal of M. it would have been done—I think now it is too late—They seem to be waiting until all the cabinet leaves the city, when to a certainty the Prest. won't act—already [Postmaster General] Brown, my best friend, has left—every day is an irrecoverable loss—every day I am expecting to hear of the resignation of Floyd, which would settle the matter—every day the Prest. is growing weaker and more childish and we may soon have an entire new cabinet, and still we hear continually of *'next week' 'very soon' 'before long'*—[46]

Rumors of Meigs' removal sent Walter flying to the War Department for verification. The captain of engineers, in turn, heard tales of the architect's pending resignation, and each man seemed poised to declare victory over the other. But they were mere dupes in the administration's absurd strategy to keep peace with Jefferson Davis and William Bigler simultaneously. Meanwhile, Walter and his draftsmen worked on details for the dome, Senate chamber, staircases, skylights, and porticoes, but the drawings stayed in the drafting room. For his part, Meigs continued negotiations with Rice & Baird over column shafts without reaching an agreement. In the summer of 1858, workmen were building the arcade of the Senate's east portico and would soon need column shafts to continue work. Meigs visited the masons armed with a stack of copper plates inscribed:

CAPT. MONTGOMERY C. MEIGS. U. S. ENGINEERS
IN CHARGE OF
U. S. CAPITOL EXTENSION
EXTENSION OF GENERAL POST OFFICE
NEW DOME OF THE CAPITOL AND
WASHINGTON AQUEDUCT
A. D. 1858

He slipped one of the plates under a marble block just as workmen lowered it into place. He

Senate Committee on Military Affairs Room
ca. 1900

In 1856 Brumidi began decorating this room with scenes from the Revolutionary War. Only two lunettes and some wall panels were completed before work stopped in 1858. In 1871 Chairman Henry Wilson of Massachusetts had the decorations completed. Brumidi returned to paint three more scenes, including *Storming of Stony Point, 1779,* and *Washington at Valley Forge, 1778,* which are visible in this view. The room is currently occupied by the Senate Committee on Appropriations.

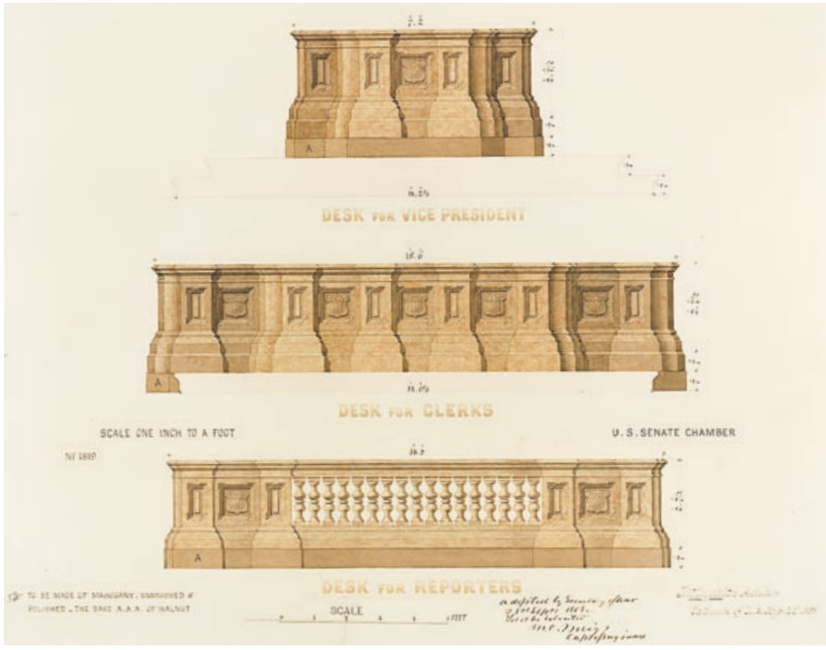
hoped the inscription would be legible for centuries to come, and perhaps be of interest to some future archaeologist. Meigs also sprinkled his name all over the Washington Aqueduct and Post Office extension in an effort to keep history informed of his deeds and whereabouts. In one particularly clever instance at the aqueduct, he had the risers of an iron staircase composed of the letters M–C–M–E–I–G–S.

During this period Walter was biding his time, held on by the encouragement of his friends. His position was nonetheless mentally and physically draining. In the latter part of July 1858, he planned a trip to Atlantic City in the hope of restoring his health from the effects of "constant and anxious attention and watching, and waiting, and working, and fighting."[47] Gone only a week, he returned home to find that Meigs had fired one of his best draftsmen, Philip Schrag. The supervising engineer had ordered Schrag to report to his office and, when the young man refused, Meigs struck his name from the payroll and wrote the architect an "insolent and *ungrammatical*" letter explaining his action.[48] For Meigs, this was another case of insubordination, while Walter considered the episode an act of tyranny. The architect immediately rehired Schrag, paying the salary out of his own pocket until the matter could be settled by the War Department.

The secretary of war dispatched Meigs to inspect various quarries capable of suppling monolithic shafts for the outside columns. Floyd would not hear of using Italian marble (as some suggested) for such a visible part of the extension. While Meigs was away, Walter happened to see a design for the vice president's desk and chair drawn by Brumidi or someone else on the engineer's staff. "It is a hideous affair," he told Rice, "and would not be tolerated by the Senate a single day.[49] Walter went to see Floyd, who gave orders to stop fabrication. He returned the drawing to Meigs along with a Walter design with orders to fabricate it. The engineer obeyed but replied sarcastically that he would compensate for its poor design by using superior materials and craftsmanship.

Walter went to the new Senate chamber on October 21, 1858, to confer with workmen installing the vice president's rostrum. Quite by accident, he met Senator Davis and was greeted cordially, believing the senator showed him "a fraternal spirit." As he returned to the workmen, he noticed that Meigs had just entered the chamber, followed by Brumidi and a retinue of assistants. Walter pretended not to notice, keeping his back toward Meigs and later describing the maneuver as "rather laughable."[50]

In his journal, Meigs did not mention seeing Walter that day, but he complained that the design of some details for the Senate chamber had not been received from the drafting room. If the room was not finished by the opening of Congress in December, it would be the architect's fault. He again tried to regain control of the drawings but received a clarifying order from the War Department directing him to ask the architect for any drawings he might need. Seizing the opportunity, Meigs sent Walter a copy of the order along with a command to surrender every drawing ever made at public expense by the architect's office: all reference drawings; all construction drawings; all presentation drawings; all drawings for the Capitol extension; the new dome; the Post Office extension; and miscellaneous projects such as the marine barracks in Pensacola, Florida. Although the order was expected (Walter actually wanted it as a means to get his dome drawings into the hands



Design of the Desk Fronts for the Vice President, Clerks, and Reporters

by Thomas U. Walter
1858

Meigs was furious when the secretary of war preferred this design to the one he submitted. He characterized Walter's design as "pulpit" furniture, and absolved himself of any criticism the desk might attract. Just above his signature the disgruntled but obedient engineer wrote: "Let it be executed."

Portrait of Senator William Seward

by Emanuel Leutze, ca. 1860

From the collections of the Union League Club of New York. Reproduced by permission

Set in the new Senate chamber, this portrait included a glimpse of the lower wall with its cast-iron wainscot, pilasters, and wall panels. Its drab color scheme was relieved by gold leaf accents and contrasted with the riot of color seen in the Brussels carpet.

Seward was depicted seated at his desk surrounded by correspondence and papers with his hand resting on a book. Until the Senate acquired its first office building in 1891, most senators were obliged to use the chamber as their office.

of the ironworkers), Meigs' request for every scrap of paper in the architect's office had to be refused or the architect would be left completely bereft of the most important part of his professional tools. He painted a vivid image of his office if Meigs succeeded in stripping it of all the drawings:

> You see he asks for every scrap of paper of every description in my office, thus breaking me up root and branch—rump and stump; — were I to comply with this order of Meigs' you might imagine me standing in my empty room with my 10 draughtsmen around me, each with a pair of hands rammed into a pair of empty pockets and your old friend, with arms folded, rolling up the whites of his eyes and exclaiming with poetic pathos *"Othello's occupation's gone"*—no, no that won't do; there must be harder fighting before that comes to pass than we have ever had yet.[51]

With the opening of the second session of the 35th Congress fast approaching, Meigs was eager to seat the Senate in its new chamber as promised. He complained to Floyd that Walter's refusal to hand over drawings was a great impediment to progress, but this got him nowhere. Floyd reminded him that he was welcome to visit the architect's office to inspect the drawings, but the engineer absolutely refused to go into enemy territory. In vain, Walter pleaded with Floyd to let him resign or to reassign Meigs: either course would suit him equally well. While their offices on Capitol Hill were close by, all correspondence between the architect and the engineer was funneled through the secretary of war's office next door to the President's House. The effects of this inefficient situation were well illustrated in the fall of 1858, when Meigs needed a design for the arms of the gallery seats in the Senate chamber. Since he would not deign to ask Walter for a design, he directed Brumidi and other assistants to come up with something. When their design was completed, he sent it to the War Department for approval. Floyd forwarded the drawing to Walter, who thought it did not harmonize with the rest of the room.[52] The architect sent a design of his own, which the secretary immediately approved and sent to Meigs.

Work to finish the new Senate chamber was bogged down by numerous such squabbles. When senators returned to Washington for the opening of Congress on December 6, 1858, they gathered in their old room, where some would have preferred

to stay. Senator Davis, however, wanted to move as soon as possible. Meigs promised that the room would be ready after the Christmas holiday. All possible speed was urged and Meigs was authorized to attend to the remaining details, including buying the carpet and selecting the damask upholstery for the cushioned gallery seats. On the evening of December 22, the room was lighted for the first time. The painted decorations were not as vivid and bright as those in the House chamber and looked good under gas lights. The following day Meigs moved his desk into the Senate chamber to drive the workmen.[53] On Christmas eve, he met with the Senate Committee on Arrangements to discuss how the old desks and chairs would be positioned in the new room. They decided to nearly duplicate the arrangement in the old room but seat the senators in three tiers instead of four. On Christmas day workers laid carpet in the gallery and lined the gallery seats with cotton flannel before putting on the damask upholstery.

On the first work day of the new year, January 3, 1859, Meigs went to the Senate chamber to help arrange the furniture and attend to last-minute details before the room opened for business the next day. While there he received word that water had been let into the Washington Aqueduct and would reach the Capitol in a few minutes. He sent for Senator Davis and together they went to the library portico and watched the fountain, or "jet d'eau," throw water sixty to seventy feet into the air. The sight of water playing in a fountain at the foot of Capitol Hill, drawn from Great Falls more than eighteen miles away, was wonderfully gratifying to both the engineer and his patron. Meigs considered the fountain and the water jet the most beautiful sight in Washington and proudly wrote: "It signifies so much good, so much safety, health and purity, that I cannot tire of looking at it. . ."[54] He wrote his father in Philadelphia about his latest accomplishment:

> I wish you could see my jet d'eau in the Capitol Park. I look upon it with constant pleasure for it seems to spring rejoicing in the air & proclaiming its arrival for the free use of the sick & well, rich & poor, gentle & simple, old & young for generation after generation which will have come to rise up & call me blessed.[55]

On the morning of January 4, 1859, Walter hurriedly wrote his wife with news about the arrival of Potomac water to the city and a report on the number of callers he had on New Year's day, a social custom that he thought "don't suit these times." (Among other annoyances, a motley and inebriated band of strangers turned away from Walter's door when they discovered he was not serving food or drink.) Much of his letter was about the upcoming ceremony in the Capitol accompanying the Senate's historic move from the old chamber to its new room:

> Every thing is ready for the Senate and I see Meigs about as busy as a nailer—he has not been here before since my return; but there is no doubt that he will flourish today—I am going to the old hall at 12, and I think I will brave it out—The Senate will be opened by prayer; the committee on arrangements will then make their report, and the Vice Prest. will deliver an address. They will then move in procession to the new chamber, take their seats, and the

South Corridor in Front of the Senate Chamber
ca. 1860

Corridors were painted in a polychromatic color scheme to emphasize the elaborate decoration. French zinc was a favorite substitute for white lead paint because it did not smudge as readily under gas lighting conditions.

chaplain will again pray, after which they will proceed to business.

At half past one o'clock Walter was back in his office and was able to write a postscript giving an eye-witness account of the ceremony:

> The ceremony is over, and a most beautiful and appropriate one it was—not one word said that was objectionable—I accompanied the senators to their new room, and the entrance was very imposing—every seat in the galleries was filled—they were one vast mass of humanity—scores of senators congratulated me—some who I did not know.[56]

Senate Chamber
1867

Lined with Corinthian pilasters grouped in pairs, the lower walls of the Senate chamber were rich creations in cast iron and plaster. A niche framed the presiding officer's chair with the reporters' gallery above. Senators' desks and chairs were reused from the old chamber.

Meigs was impressed by Vice President John C. Breckinridge of Kentucky, who made "the most eloquent oration I ever heard. . . . His tribute to the memory of Calhoun, Webster, and Clay was beautiful and his condemnation of the man who would strike his sacrilegious hand at our Union was terrible and sublime."[57] Upon entering the new chamber Meigs noticed that the galleries were filled to capacity and the air was pure. The temperature was maintained at seventy degrees—give or take a degree—all day.

Benjamin B. French attended the historic ceremony and recalled being in the gallery overlooking the new room as the "potent, grave and reverend seignors" entered for the first time, led by the sergeant at arms and the vice president. From that vantage point he formed his first judgment of the new room, which, while not wholly favorable, was decidedly more positive than his low opinion of the new House chamber. Comparing it with the beautiful old Senate chamber, however, he thought the new one was like a cellar ventilated by a furnace blower.[58]

For those unable to come to Washington to see the new Senate chamber, the press carried descriptions that were far more complimentary than those following the opening of the hall of the House more than a year earlier. *The New York Herald,* for instance, told its readers:

> The general aspect of the new hall is light and graceful. In shape and dimension it is similar to the new Hall of Representatives, but to the eye appears more finely proportioned. The style and character of the decorations are nearly the same in both Houses, except that in the Senate the tone of color is more subdued. The area of the floor is 80 feet by 48 feet, and of the roof 113 by 80 feet, the difference being occupied by a continuous gallery around four sides of the apartment capable of seating 1,200 persons. The inner roof or ceiling, of iron, is flat, with deep panels, twenty-one of which are fitted with ground glass, having in the center of each pane a colored medallion representing the printing press, steam engine, cornucopia, and other symbols of progress and plenty. The light is supplied wholly through this window in the roof. The gas apparatus is placed above the ceiling. The ceiling is thirty-five feet from the floor, but presents an appearance of greater altitude. It is encrusted with floral and other embellishments in high relief, and all of iron. The floor of the chamber is covered with 1,700 yards of tapestry carpeting, having a large pattern of flowers on a purple ground.[59]

Meigs' annual report for 1858 was mainly about the hall of the House, which had been in use for a year. He touted its astonishingly successful acoustical properties, which promoted perfect hearing and speaking to every corner. Meigs published a letter from Speaker James L. Orr of South Carolina testifying to the comfort of the new chamber and the parliamentary order fostered by its acoustics, heating, ventilation, and lighting. Meigs also claimed that the hall promoted the good health of members and contributed to their ability to better conduct the nation's business. More bills were passed and more hours were spent in session than during any other period in history. Despite the workload, no member of the House had died during the long and laborious session.[60]

Reporting on the new dome, Meigs stated that forty-two and a half feet of ironwork was in place, including the skeleton of the drum's first story. Standing on the cantilever brackets were the thirty-six columns of the peristyle. The decorative skin that would cover the dome's lower frame was under way at the foundry in New York operated by Janes, Beebe & Company. He wished he were able to report greater progress on the dome and blamed the delay on Walter. In his annual message Meigs wrote:

> I should be pleased to be able to report a greater progress in this work, but the want of cordial co-operation on the part of the architect associated with me has much interfered with the studies and drawings of the work. As it appears to me, he has much mistaken his authority and his duty; and, as it was a matter which could be settled only by the department, I have awaited its decision.[61]

It was unusual to censure a public official such as Walter in a public document such as the secretary of war's annual report, but it gave Meigs the opportunity to record for posterity his troubles with the architect and perhaps was seen as a way to nudge the War Department into action. Meigs' report also showed that he spent $1.13 million over the course of six months and a few weeks later would be completely out of funds. These facts left Walter to wonder "if the money lasted but 7 months under the retarding influences which he says I have exerted, how long would it have lasted if it had not been retarded?"[62]

The President's Room

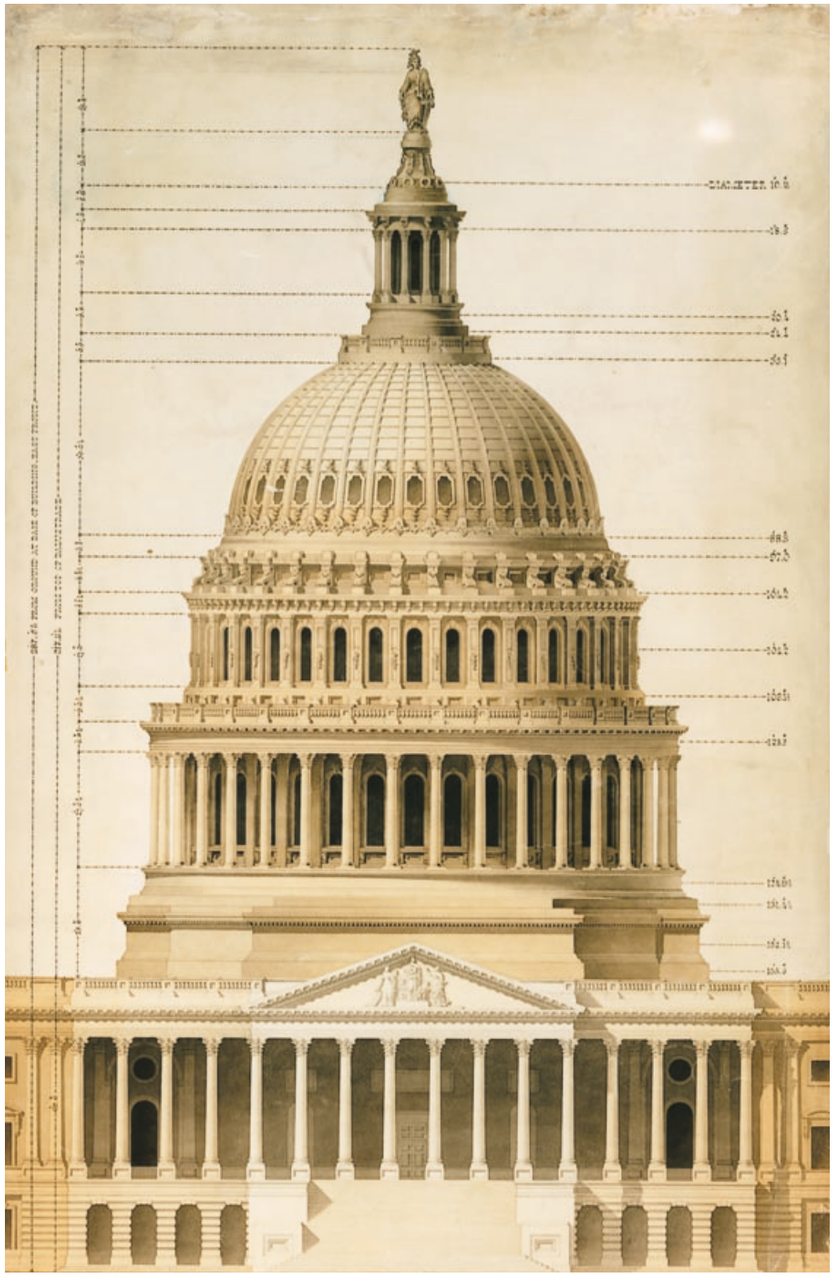
In 1859 Brumidi began decorating the President's Room with allegorical and historical figures on the ceiling while the walls were painted with portraits of George Washington and members of the first cabinet. The overall composition was derived from the ceiling of the Stanza della Segnatura at the Vatican. Hanging in the center of the room is an elaborate eighteen-arm bronze chandelier with allegorical statuettes mingled with figures of Washington and Franklin. It was made by Cornelius & Baker in 1864 and cost $900. All other gas burning chandeliers were banished from the Capitol following the explosion in 1898, but this one survived by being electrified. (1996 photograph.)

DOME REVISIONS

During the height of his battles with Meigs, little new work was being demanded of Walter, who had the time and leisure to make revisions to old designs. On Saturday, February 12, 1859, he entered a note in his diary saying that on that day he "completed sketches of new design of Dome—changed the exterior proportions above Peristyle."[63] The revisions were necessary to accommodate the statue of Freedom, then on its way to Washington.

After Crawford's death, his widow made arrangements to ship the model of Freedom to Washington. It was a jinxed voyage, marred by leaking vessels, inadequate repairs, bad weather, and navigational miscalculations. The model left Leghorn in the spring of 1858 on a ship that soon foundered in the Mediterranean but was able to coast into Gibraltar, where repairs were made. Setting out again, the ship foundered in the Atlantic, taking on water, and much of the cargo was heaved overboard to lighten the load; it was sheer luck that the six cases containing the statue were spared a burial at sea. Arriving in Bermuda, the ship was condemned, and alternate transportation had to be arranged. By the end of December part of the statue had reached New York, but part remained in Bermuda. The statue did not arrive in Washington until the summer of 1859, some months after Walter completed the revisions necessary to accommodate it.

When Walter's original dome design was drawn, the crowning statue was intended to stand about sixteen and a half feet tall, but Crawford's third design for Freedom stood, or so he reported, eighteen feet, nine inches. By the time it was finished, however, the statue had grown to nineteen and a half feet. Its conical pedestal had a bottom diameter of fourteen feet, eight and a quarter inches. Unless adjustments were made, the statue and its pedestal would not fit on top the new dome. Chief among the necessary alterations was the proportion and shape of the cupola. Walter lowered the height of the cupola seventeen feet, thus changing its profile from ellipsoidal to circular. This increased the diameter of the platform on top of the cupola by about five feet. The tholus' diameter grew by



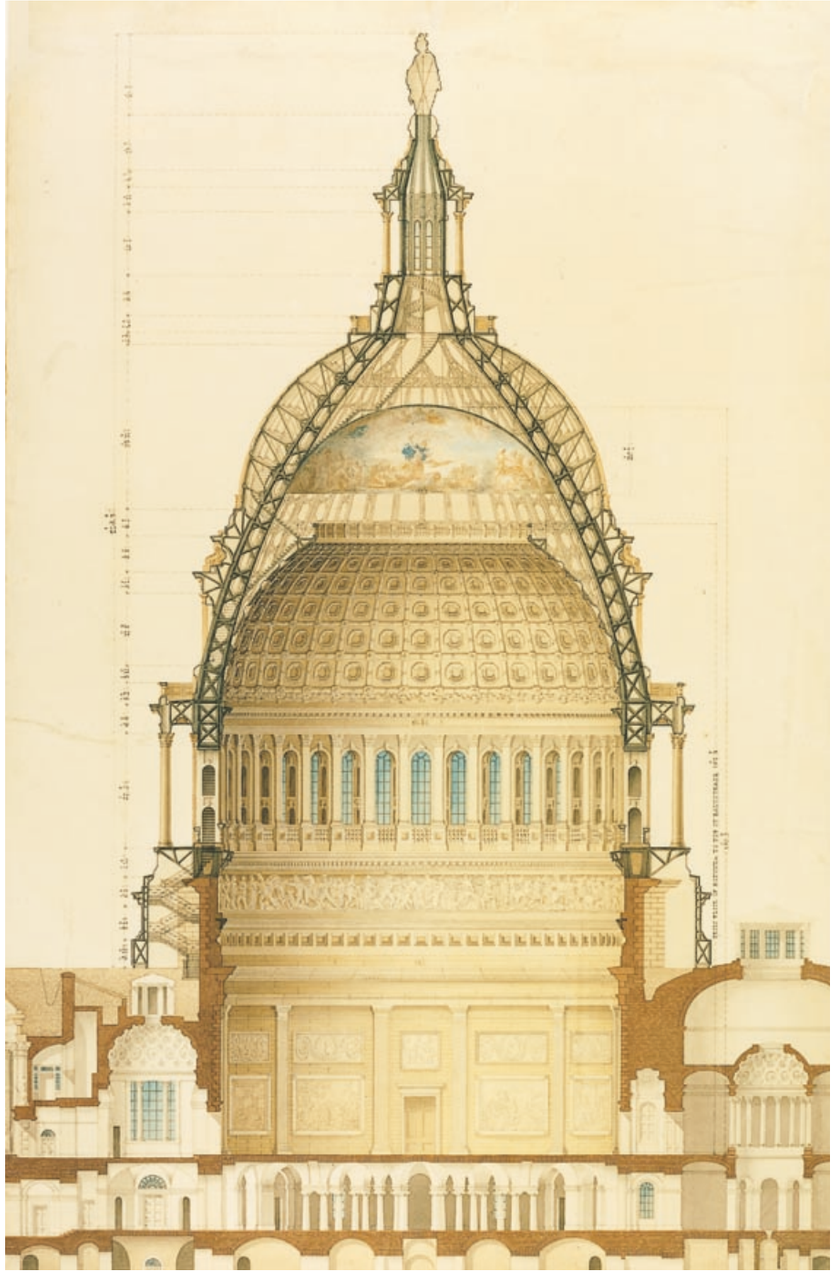
Revised Dome Design
by Thomas U. Walter, 1859

To accommodate the statue of Freedom, Walter adjusted the dimensions and proportions of the upper parts of the dome. The revisions were illustrated in this elevation, which is among Walter's finest drawings.

three and a half feet to eighteen feet, three inches. The changes brought the overall height of the dome (as measured from the ground) down from 300 feet to 287½ feet. At the same time the consoles of the attic were redesigned, made broader and enriched with beading, scrolls, and floral ornaments. Windows between the consoles were replaced with panels. While lower than the earlier design, Walter's final dome design was bold and rich, suffering not at all from its reduced height.

Revisions inside were more dramatic. There, Walter designed a wholly new inner dome better scaled for the rotunda. Through the eye of this inner dome a large painting would be seen, a grand and dramatic conclusion to the room's interior design. Walter had admired a similar scheme at the Panthéon in Paris during his trip to Europe in 1838, and he was now determined to crown the rotunda with a heroic painting. It would be the largest fresco in the building, unrivaled by anything American art had ever witnessed before. It is not known if Walter discussed the project with Brumidi at the time the painting was first conceived, but such a conversation was unlikely considering the artist's close relationship with the supervising engineer. Walter's revisions were made without Meigs' knowledge and drawn in the one place he refused to go—the architect's office in the Capitol. The engineer probably never saw the beautiful elevation and the accompanying section, which are among the greatest architectural renderings produced in nineteenth-century America. The drawings were finished in February 1859 but not shown to the supervising engineer until Meigs' successor took over later that year.

At the end of February 1859, Walter submitted vouchers for the pay of the draftsmen who assisted him drawing the revised dome design. He signed the vouchers with his name under the title "Architect of the New Dome." If the men had worked on drawings for the Post Office extension or the Capitol extension, the architect's title would have been changed accordingly. But Meigs took exception to Walter calling himself "Architect of the New Dome" and refused to honor the vouchers. He returned them with a command to change the title. He said he did not know that any such title had been conferred on Walter and he thought



Section through Dome of U. S. Capitol
by Thomas U. Walter, 1859

Inspired by the Panthéon in Paris, Walter's 1859 interior revisions introduced a monumental painting suspended over the oculus of a new inner dome.

it was inconsistent with his own authority. Although titles do generally mean a great deal to military men, Meigs was engaged in pure harassment, trying to make life so miserable that Walter would go away.[64]

The chief clerk in Meigs' office looked out his window above the Adams Express office and saw Walter's carriage driving "like mad" up Pennsylvania Avenue soon after he received Meigs' letter.[65] The architect was off to the War Department with the latest evidence of Meigs' tyranny. Before going to see Floyd, Walter replied to Meigs in a long letter containing a simple question: "If I am not the architect of the New Dome I would like to know who is."[66] He later wrote the secretary about the way he signed the vouchers and then described Meigs' "quibble" with it. Walter said the engineer was motivated by a desire to prevent the young men from receiving their wages, and he asked the secretary to interpose on their behalf.[67] On March 19, the secretary of war ordered Meigs to pay Walter's men. Instead of obeying the order right away, however, the engineer demanded to see the document appointing Walter architect of the new dome. Walter responded with a lecture about the nature of a commission in "civil architecture." Back and forth it went, long letters from the engineer attacking Walter on numerous points, accusing him of tricks and duplicity. Walter accused the engineer of trying to rob his professional reputation in order to magnify his own "aggrandizement."[68]

The problems at the Capitol festered under the lame administration of President Buchanan. The secretary of war's health became a problem in the spring of 1859, making it impossible for either Meigs or Walter to see Floyd to discuss matters that might have eased the terrible situation. On April 27 Walter informed Rice that the secretary was weak and "broken down."[69] He was suffering from a vague nervous condition that was aggravated by exciting talk. "As the Capitol & Meigs always excites him," Walter wrote, "he avoids all reference to them if he can with propriety do so." The architect thought that only a rest for a few months far from Washington would restore Floyd's health.

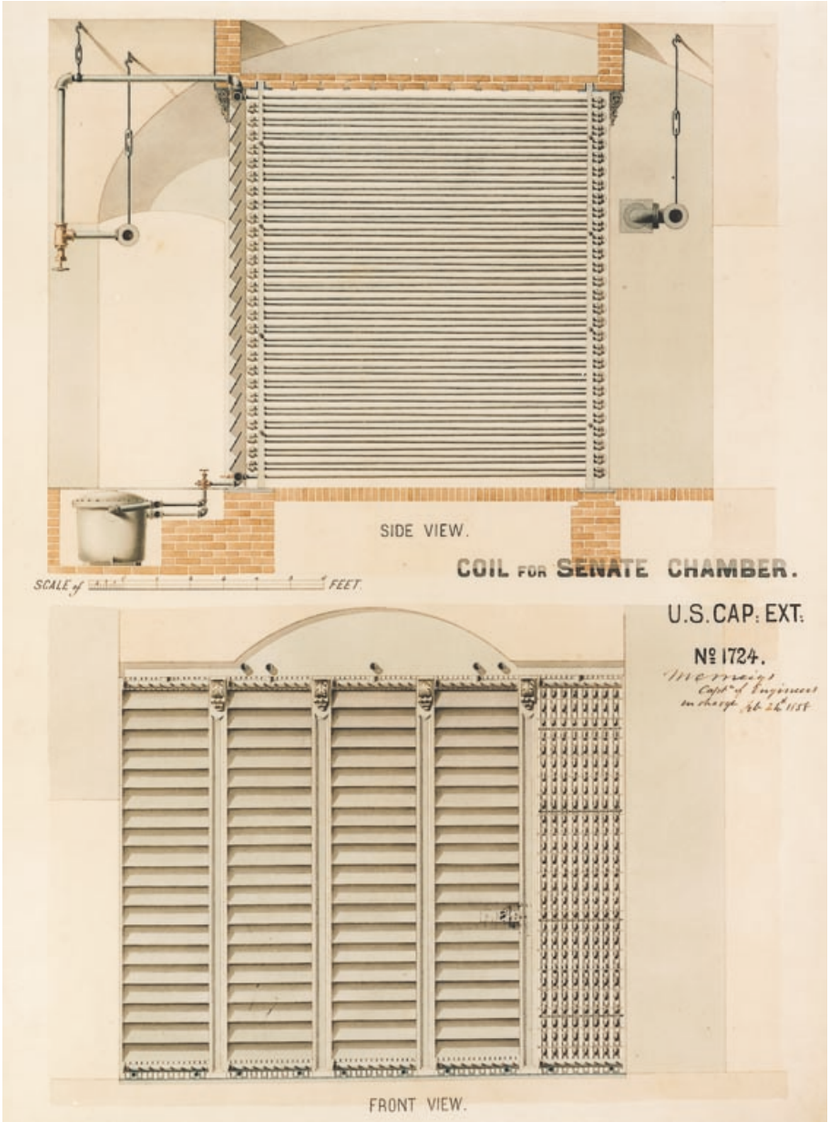
The secretary of war was, however, well enough to order Meigs back to the marble quarries in Massachusetts to see about getting column shafts. If prospects remained unfavorable, he was to return by way of John F. Connolly's quarry in Texas, Maryland (near Baltimore), which was said to be capable of fulfilling an order for monolithic shafts. On April 28 Meigs was in Lee and found the quarry in worse shape than he expected. He did not believe it could even supply the shafts in two pieces and thought the vast amount of marble needed for the cornices and architraves would prohibit anything else—especially column shafts—from being extracted without years of effort and boundless good luck. On May 5, Meigs was in Maryland, where he found a couple of blocks large enough for monoliths and thought the rest could be had with ease.[70] Unfortunately, Connolly's stone cost more than Italian marble and was inferior to both Italian and Massachusetts marbles. Upon returning home, he wrote a report to the War Department and was instructed to declare that portion of Rice & Baird's contract dealing with column shafts null and void. A supplemental contract would be drawn directly between the government and Connolly. But before anything was done, the president stepped in and cautioned against violating Rice & Baird's contract. Buchanan did not wish to antagonize John Rice, whose brother was the editor of *The Pennsylvanian,* a powerful Democratic mouthpiece in his home state.

Meigs was then ordered to visit every quarry offering marble for the columns, and on May 21, 1859, he embarked on an extensive journey covering 1,000 miles in twelve days. Another inspection trip began on June 10 and lasted nine days. In all, Meigs visited seventeen quarries and found seven that could furnish monolithic shafts. He considered all of them too expensive and inferior. None was as good as the Massachusetts marble nor was any as cheap as Italian marble. On June 29, he recommended that Rice & Heebner be permitted to supply monoliths from any source and that they be allowed six months to make arrangements with some other quarry. Thus Rice's contract would remain intact, but another marble would be used for the shafts. Floyd immediately approved Meigs' recommendation. When Walter heard of it, he wrote Rice—in *"profound confidence"*—to suggest that unless specifically prohibited from doing so, his firm should import Italian marble.[71] If Buchanan and Floyd maintained their objection to foreign marble, Walter thought a congressional

Coil for Senate Chamber

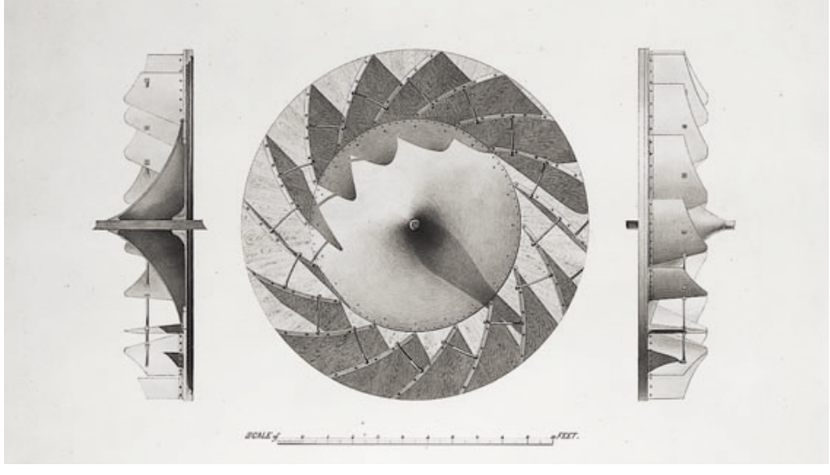
by Thomas U. Walter and Montgomery C. Meigs
1858

Hot-water pipes warmed the air that ventilated the extension.



resolution could relieve them of responsibility for the decision. The problem was not with American marble but getting the shafts in one piece. Walter personally did not like monolithic shafts and preferred to use six or eight pieces so as to produce the same effect as the rest of the building. To give his position authority from antiquity, Walter claimed that building up columns with drums "was the practice when Grecian art was at its zenith, while monolithic shafts marked the decline of art—there is no exception in ancient architecture to this rule." He was in the minority, however: "I have made these arguments over and over again, but nobody cares a fig for them—monoliths they want and they will have them." Apparently the old idea of using granite had resurfaced, with proponents claiming that the darker stone would give a *"fine contrast"* to the white marble walls. To avoid the horror of placing granite shafts on a marble building, Walter advised Rice to strike a deal with Meigs as soon as possible.

On doctor's orders, the secretary of war spent much of the summer of 1859 convalescing at home, or "taking the waters" at White Sulfur Springs in



Fan for Committee Rooms

by Thomas U. Walter and Montgomery C. Meigs, 1857

Although the drawing was made in Walter's drafting room, the fan design was dictated by Meigs' consulting engineer, Robert Briggs. Made of wood and powered by steam, fans such as this forced air over hot water coils and then into ducts that snaked throughout the wings.

Steam Engine and Fan
ca. 1911

One of the last operating steam-powered fans is shown here just before it was decommissioned.

what later became West Virginia. His absence left things fairly quiet on Capitol Hill. Building funds were low and the only work of major consequence at the Capitol was done in the marble yard. Even that work stopped when the sawmill was destroyed by fire in mid-August. No work could proceed on the dome without the drawings, which Walter would not surrender and Meigs would not retrieve. The captain considered the architect and his men to be in a state of rebellion and awaited the department's action to correct the situation.

During the summer the last of the bronze railings from Philadelphia were being put up on the members' private stairs the south wing. In late August the commissioner of public buildings agreed to keep the old hall of the House closed while workmen unpacked the statue of Freedom and put it together. The arrival of Crawford's statue would normally have excited the engineer, but his enthusiasm was on the wane. Meigs confided in his journal that he felt discouraged by his diminished authority, his lack of respect for the War Department, and the department's lack of faith in him. Without support or sufficient authority, he felt "less interest in it, and I can not drive it while I am taken up with the correspondence and imputation of the War Department, which ought to support me; in fact, is trying to defeat me and embarrass me all the time."[72]

THE LAST STRAW

Among the many problems Meigs had with the War Department during this period, heating the Post Office extension was one of the most contentious and, as it turned out, the last episode in an extensive battle of wills. For a year and a half, Meigs tried to convince the department that Nason & Dodge of New York was the most qualified firm to undertake the heating work, but Floyd saw the opportunity to enrich Democratic friends and overruled the engineer. At first Floyd wanted the contract given to Charles Robinson, a dentist from Virginia, who had arranged to sell the contract to Henry F. Thomas & Company of Baltimore. By the summer of 1859, Robinson had disappeared from the scene, but the Baltimore firm remained Floyd's choice for the work. Month after month Meigs and Floyd argued until the secretary finally ordered the engineer to enter into a contract with Thomas & Company. Meigs refused on the grounds that he was legally bound to advertise the contract for sixty days. He also had ample evidence that the firm was not qualified and would probably subcontract with other firms after skimming a hefty profit for themselves. Another version of the story was told by the architect:

> Meigs boasted to the Secy. of his great skill and claimed the invention of the heating of the Capitol as his in toto; the Secy. concluded that so much good brains ought not to be lost, and therefore ordered him to contract with Thomas & Co., instead of his Capitol men Nason & Co.

so as to give him a chance to impart his wisdom to another firm.[73]

Walter observed the contest between Meigs and Floyd from a safe distance. He was sure that Meigs wanted Nason & Dodge to get the contract because they would do all the work and give him all the credit.[74] He was also convinced that Meigs was incapable of designing the heating system but would never think of asking him for help. Meigs complained that he could not study the problem without the plans, which were locked up in Walter's office. He accused the architect of retarding the work, and Walter feared another order to surrender the drawings. The department ultimately gave Meigs no such authority but ordered him to design the heating and ventilation system using Walter's plans, letting Thomas & Company make all the necessary boilers, pipes, and engines. In a letter to Meigs written on September 8, 1859, Walter indicated his intention to cooperate and offered to forward any drawings Meigs might specify.

Meigs again railed over the fact that Walter controlled the drawings and that he was placed in a position of having to ask for documents that belonged to his office. He could not ask for specific drawings since he had not seen them in years, nor did he have a record of those made more recently. Thus, it was impossible to specify which drawings to send.[75]

In communications with the War Department, Meigs kept up his vigorous protest regarding the drawings. Meanwhile, instead of contracting with Thomas & Company as instructed, he wrote machine shops and foundries asking them to submit bids for various parts of the work. Meigs then forwarded the information to the War Department, which had already issued instructions and was now highly annoyed to find its orders ignored again.

During Floyd's illnesses and frequent absences from the office, his chief clerk, William R. Drinkard, served as the acting secretary of war. Drinkard wrote Meigs telling him to contract with Thomas & Company without further delay. In the same letter he ordered Meigs to pay an outstanding invoice for granite used on the Post Office. Matthew Emory, the granite contractor from Richmond, was unhappy with Meigs and applied pressure on the War Department for satisfaction. Meigs replied in a long letter saying he was unable to pay for granite because he did not know how much was called for in the architectural drawings. Walter—his rebellious and disobedient assistant—would not hand them over, and the War Department alone was responsible for the continuation of the unresolved problem.[76]

Drinkard returned Meigs' letter with a reiteration of the department's previous orders regarding the rights of the engineer to examine drawings in the architect's office, along with an order to pay Emory's bill. The acting secretary claimed that he was well aware of the facts of both cases and knew Floyd's intentions in both regards.

Considering the tone of many letters that had passed between the War Department and the engineer's office, Drinkard's latest note was perfectly polite. Yet, for some unexplainable reason Meigs took offense, haughtily replying that he did not need a clerk to explain written orders to him: "I am as capable of understanding a written order of the Secretary of War, as the chief clerk or the acting secretary . . . my official rights cannot be explained away by the knowledge Mr. Drinkard may have of the desires or purposes of the Secretary."

After so many months doing battle with the War Department, Meigs had lost his temper. Despite the justice that he thought his cause represented, his intemperate words smacked of insubordination. Upon returning to the office after an extensive absence, Floyd was furious at the tone of Meigs' retort and wrote:

> The conduct of Captain Meigs, in thus interpolating the records in his possession with a paper manifesting such flagrant insubordination, and containing language both disrespectful and insulting to his superiors, is reprehensible in the highest degree. The spirit that dictated it is manifest throughout this correspondence, and shows a continuous insubordination that deserves the strongest censure.[77]

The captain's ill-considered and impolite letter to the acting secretary was the last straw in the battle of wills waged in the War Department. Floyd was too tired to argue with Meigs anymore and no longer cared if Jefferson Davis stayed mad forever. On October 29, 1859, Floyd sent for Captain William B. Franklin of the Topographical Engineers, whom he intended to name as Meigs' replacement. Franklin listened while the secretary described the state of affairs and said that either he or Meigs would have to go. The next day

Senate Reception Room
ca. 1910

For the most elaborate room in the extension, Captain Meigs drew upon the talents of a variety of artists and manufacturers to carry out his ambitious decorating scheme. The ornamental plaster work was overseen by a Frenchman, the scagliola and frescoes were by Italians, the encaustic tile floor came from England, and the bronze chandeliers were made in Philadelphia. It was here that Meigs bid farewell to his workmen after the secretary of war reassigned him in November 1859.

Franklin went to see Meigs to recount his interview with Floyd, who always felt "thwarted" by the engineer.[78] Later that day Meigs heard a rumor that an order had been issued relieving him of his command at the Capitol: the rumor was true.

On November 2, 1859, Meigs received notice of the secretary's action through the mail. He asked the principal workmen to gather in the Senate reception room—the Capitol's most elaborately decorated space—where he introduced Franklin and said goodbye. He wrote a short letter of farewell that was read by one of the foremen. "They seem to feel regret at the parting," Meigs

recalled that evening, "Many of these strong men looked upon me with moistened eyes; and for myself, I could not trust my voice to speak or to read what I had written."[79] John C. Harkness replied for the workmen, concluding: "To whatever field of labor you may hereafter be assigned, be assured, dear sir, you will bear with you the unanimous esteem of these my collaborators whom I represent; and for your present and future welfare they will continue to cherish the most ardent wishes."[80] Despite their goodbyes, however, the workmen and the Capitol had not seen the last of Montgomery C. Meigs.

Walter greeted the news of Meigs' departure with little more than a sigh of relief. He was glad the episode was finally over and looked forward to moving ahead. Meigs' personality, his awkward position as a military man in charge of civilian projects, his handling of the interior decorations, and his driving ambition made harmonious relations unlikely. Yet history would remember Meigs' high aspirations for the Capitol, his administrative prowess, his amazing energy, and his unshakable honesty in the face of the most corrupt administration yet seen in American history. Also remembered was an unfortunate legacy of windowless chambers, the subject of endless complaint and spirited condemnation by countless congressmen and senators until the 1920s, when air-conditioning cooled them down.