
CHAPTER II

THE COMPETITION FOR A DESIGN

THE history of what has transpired in the Capitol would be the history of the country from 1800 to the present day. All matters of import to our nation have been considered, weighed, and acted upon in this building, whether they related to war, finance, commerce, the making or the interpretation of law. All the Presidents and most prominent statesmen, warriors, and jurists of the country since the adoption of the Constitution have been intimately associated with this building. The histories of the distinguished men who have frequented its halls have been written by many able hands. In the following pages I propose to give a history of the structure in which the history of the country has been made.¹

Thomas Johnson, David Stuart, and Daniel Carroll, the commissioners in charge of laying out the Federal City, in a letter to President Washington, October 21, 1791, say: "We have requested him [L'Enfant] to prepare a draft of the public buildings for our inspection, and he has

promised to enter on it as soon as he finds himself disengaged. He can have recourse to books in Philadelphia and can not have it here."²

L'Enfant made studies for the buildings in connection with the preparation of his map, but Washington and Jefferson do not seem to have at any time contemplated making use of his architectural ideas. Several years later L'Enfant made a claim for compensation for planning and conducting the erection of public buildings. This claim was evidently made with reference to work which he thought he was entitled to do in the future, as the letters of the period show that he never made the plans which the commissioners requested him to draw. L'Enfant was discharged February 27, 1792, before the public competitions for the Capitol and White House, and had nothing to do with any work in the city after that date.³

The act of Congress which established the city upon its present site also required that buildings should be erected to accommodate the

¹ For an earlier version of this chapter, see Glenn Brown, "History of the United States Capitol," *The American Architect and Building News* 52 (May 9, 1896): 51–54 and (May 23, 1896): 75–77, where drawings from the 1792 design competition for the Capitol were published for the first time. Brown's interpretation of this competition and his claim that Thornton was the primary architect of the old Capitol were widely accepted as authoritative until Fiske Kimball and Wells Bennett published their research between 1916 and 1923 on Stephen Hallet, William Thornton, and the design competition for the Capitol. See Wells Bennett, "Stephen Hallet and His Designs for the National Capitol, 1791–94," reprinted from the *Journal of the American Institute of Architects* (July, August, September, October, 1916): 1–31. Fiske Kimball and Wells Bennett, "The Competition for the Federal Buildings," *Journal of the American Institute of Architects* 7 (January, March, May, August, December, 1919): 8–12, 98–102, 202–210, 355–361, 521–528; and "William Thornton and the Design of the United States Capitol," *Art Studies* 1 (1923): 76–92. See also Wells Bennett's critique of Brown in a letter to the editor in the *Nation* 102 (January 13, 1916): 43–44.

² Commissioners of the District of Columbia to President George Washington, October 21, 1791, RG 42, DCC, NARA.

³ For a modern and more speculative account of the importance of L'Enfant's influence on George Washington and for a discussion of L'Enfant's claims to Congress for professional compensation, see Bates Lowry, *Building a National Image: Architectural Drawings for the American Democracy, 1789–1912* (Washington: National Building Museum, 1985), 16–19; 226. Lowry contends that L'Enfant's drawings or studies for the Capitol may have provided a model that inspired both the Hallet and Thornton designs. He sees striking similarities between their designs and L'Enfant's ground plan for the Capitol, depicted in his 1791 manuscript plan. The only biography of L'Enfant is Hans Paul Caemmerer, *The Life of Pierre Charles L'Enfant, Planner of the City Beautiful* (Washington: National Republic Printing Co., 1950; reprint New York: Da Capo Press, 1970). See also the documentary work of Elizabeth Kite, *L'Enfant and Washington, 1791–92* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins Press, 1929; reprint New York: Arno Press, 1972).

several branches of the Government, which were to be ready for occupancy by the year 1800. Commissioners Thomas Johnson, David Stuart, and Daniel Carroll were appointed to see that the laws of Congress in reference to the Federal City were properly executed, and one of their earliest duties was to obtain plans for the new buildings. As there were no buildings in this country of magnitude equal to the contemplated ones, it was difficult to select an architect, by judging of the work he had already accomplished, without selecting one from the Old World. So, after mature deliberation, the commissioners, acting on the recommendation of President Washington and Secretary of State Thomas Jefferson, decided to have a public competition for the Capitol and the President's House. March 6, 1792, Thomas Jefferson wrote to the commissioners: "It is necessary to advertise immediately for plans for the Capitol and the President's House." At the same time he returned the draft of an advertisement which the commissioners had sent him, revised by Washington and himself.⁴ The commissioners were directed to send the advertisement, when finally correct, for insertion in Philadelphia and other papers. Probably this was the first architectural competition inaugurated in this country. Certainly the first Government competition soliciting plans was made by this advertisement. At the present day we would not consider the conditions of this competition model ones, and it is a matter of surprise that they should have produced such successful results.⁵ The following is the form of the advertisement as it appeared in the papers of the period:

⁴ This letter and the draft advertisements for competitions for the design of the Capitol and President's House, with revisions and notes by Jefferson and Washington, are published in Charles T. Cullen, ed., *The Papers of Thomas Jefferson* (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 1990), vol. 23, 224–228.

⁵ At the time Brown was directly involved in the American Institute of Architects's legislative efforts to open commissions for federal government buildings to private architects and to establish a uniform method of conducting design competitions for federal projects. Brown sketched the background of this legislation and provided an exaggerated account of its success in "The Tarsney Act," *Brickbuilder* (May 1908): 5–12.

A PREMIUM

of a lot in the city, to be designated by impartial judges, and \$500, or a medal of that value, at the option of the party, will be given by the Commissioners of Federal Buildings to persons who, before the 15th day of July, 1792, shall produce them the most approved plan, if adopted by them, for a Capitol to be erected in the city, and \$250 or a medal for the plan deemed next in merit to the one they shall adopt; the building to be of brick and to contain the following compartments to wit:

A conference room.	}	To contain 300 persons each.	}	These rooms to be of full elevation.
A room for Representatives.				
A lobby or antechamber to the latter.				
A Senate room of 1,200 square feet of area.				
An antechamber and lobby to the latter.				

Twelve rooms of 600 square feet area each for committee rooms and clerks to be of half the elevation of the former.

Drawings will be expected of the ground plats, elevations of each front, and sections through the building in such directions as may be necessary to explain the material, structure, and an estimate of the cubic feet of the brick work composing the whole mass of the wall.

THOS. JOHNSON,
DD. STUART,
DANL. CARROLL,
Commissioners.

MARCH 14, 1792.⁶

⁶ See *Gazette of the United States* [Philadelphia], March 24, 1792. The competition announcement was published after its approval by the commissioners.

Jefferson sent the commissioners clippings of this advertisement on March 21, 1792, from several Philadelphia papers, at the same time advising them to advertise in other newspapers and to procure a superintendent.⁷ In answer to this advertisement, plans were received from architects, contractors, and amateurs. The competitors who are mentioned in the records, old letters, or on drawings were Stephen Hallet, Judge Turner, Samuel Blodgett, Lamphiere, S. M. McIntire, Jacob Small, James Diamond, Charles Winter Smith, Andrew Mayo, Philip Hart, Abram Farris, Collen Williamson, Carstairs, and Hasborough.⁸ The plans submitted were, with few exceptions, peculiarly indifferent. The larger number of the drawings were made by amateurs or contractors who did not have the first idea as to what constituted either good draftsmanship or design or what were the necessary requisites of a Congressional hall or a President's mansion. Quite a number of these rejected plans are in possession of the Maryland Historical Society. I have selected some of the poorest as well as the best for illustration. [See Plates 3 to 14.]

It is difficult to imagine anyone earnestly submitting designs such as are shown in Plates 4 to 9 with the idea of meeting the approval of an intelligent committee. Several competitors of a similar caliber protested against the award, as they considered the selected design inferior to the ones which they presented.

⁷ Thomas Jefferson to the Commissioners of the District of Columbia, March 21, 1792, in Cullen, ed., *The Papers of Thomas Jefferson*, vol. 23, 320–321.

⁸ For a description and illustration of all known competition drawings, with biographical sketches of the entrants, see Jeanne F. Butler, *Competition 1792: Designing a Nation's Capitol* (special issue), *Capitol Studies* 4 (1976). Butler found no direct evidence to confirm that Andrew Mayo, John Collins, Thomas Carstairs, and Collen Williamson were competitors. Brown may have confused Andrew Mayo with Andrew Mayfield Carshore. Brown misspelled Robert Goin Lanphiere's name as Lamphiere, Collen Williamson's name as Colin, and Leonard Harbaugh's name as Hasborough, and he also misspelled Blodget. Judge Turner's first name was George.

President Washington went to the new Federal City on July 15, 1792. The competition was closed on this date, and the commissioners had been duly notified by Thomas Jefferson, July 5, to hold all the drawings for the President's inspection.⁹ James Hoban's design for the "President's Palace" was selected without hesitation. No one sent in drawings for the Capitol that were satisfactory. The only plans that appear to have received consideration were those of Lamphiere, Hallet, and Turner. Turner's plan was not received, judging by letter of notice, until July 19.¹⁰

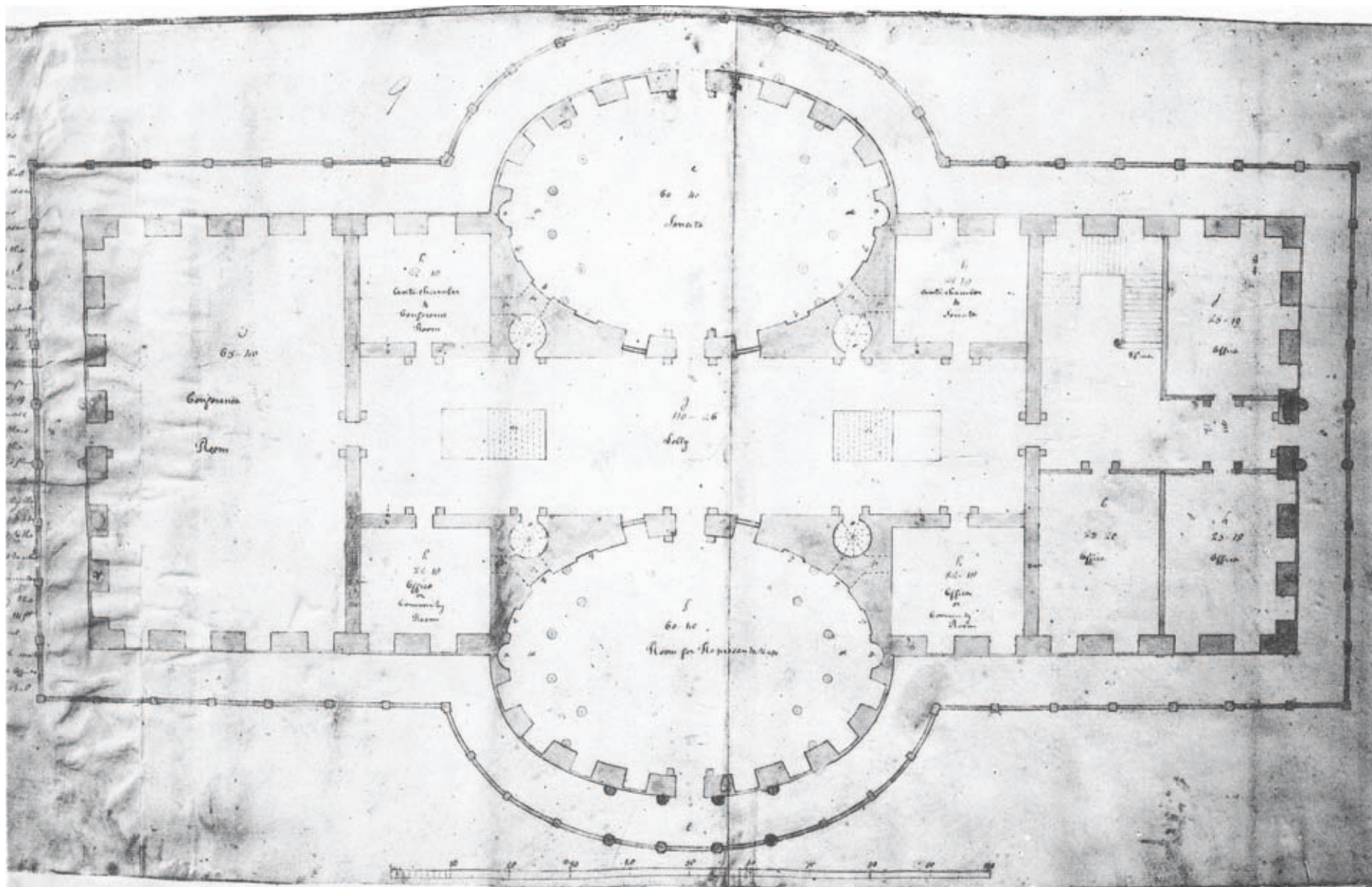
On July 17, 1792, the commissioners wrote to Stephen Hallet, stating that his plan had been submitted to the President, and further saying: "Style of architecture of yours has attracted; the distribution of parts is not thought sufficiently convenient." The commissioners suggest additional rooms and recommend Hallet to come to Washington City and examine the site. "We wish you to visit us as soon as you can and have a free and full communication of ideas with us. Your design may perhaps be improved into approbation. In all events, we will liberally indemnify you for your expenses."¹¹ This letter was sent in the care of the Secretary of State in Philadelphia, showing that Hallet was at the time a resident of the Quaker City. July 19 the commissioners wrote to President Washington, saying they had determined to give Lamphiere's plan no further consideration, at the same time forwarding the drawings of Judge Turner and telling the President of their invitation to Hallet. Their letter ends in these words: "Still hope a little time may give you an opportunity of making a choice to your satisfaction."¹² It is well

⁹ Saul K. Padover, ed., *Thomas Jefferson and the National Capital* (Washington: Government Printing Office, 1946), 152. Published from the Commissioner's letterbooks, 1791–93, RG 42, DCC, NARA.

¹⁰ Commissioners to George Turner, July 19, 1792, RG 42, DCC, NARA.

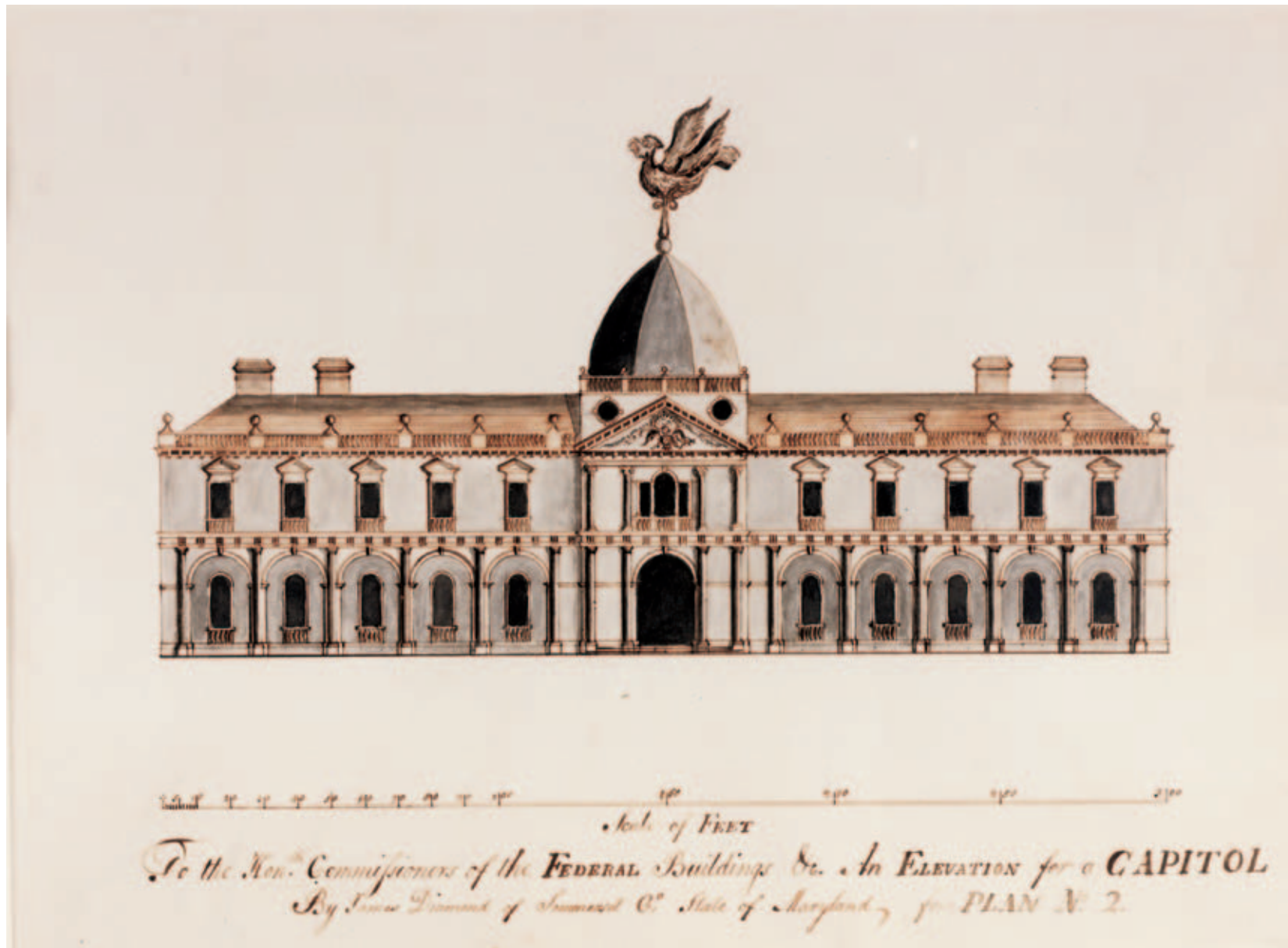
¹¹ Commissioners to Stephen Hallet, July 17, 1792, RG 42, DCC, NARA.

¹² Commissioners to President George Washington, July 19, 1792, RG 42, DCC, NARA.



GROUND PLAN OF LAMPHIER'S COMPETITIVE DESIGN.

Cropped image of Robert Lanphier's "Second Floor" plan for the Capitol. Brown misspelled Lanphier's name and mislabeled the drawing. MHS.



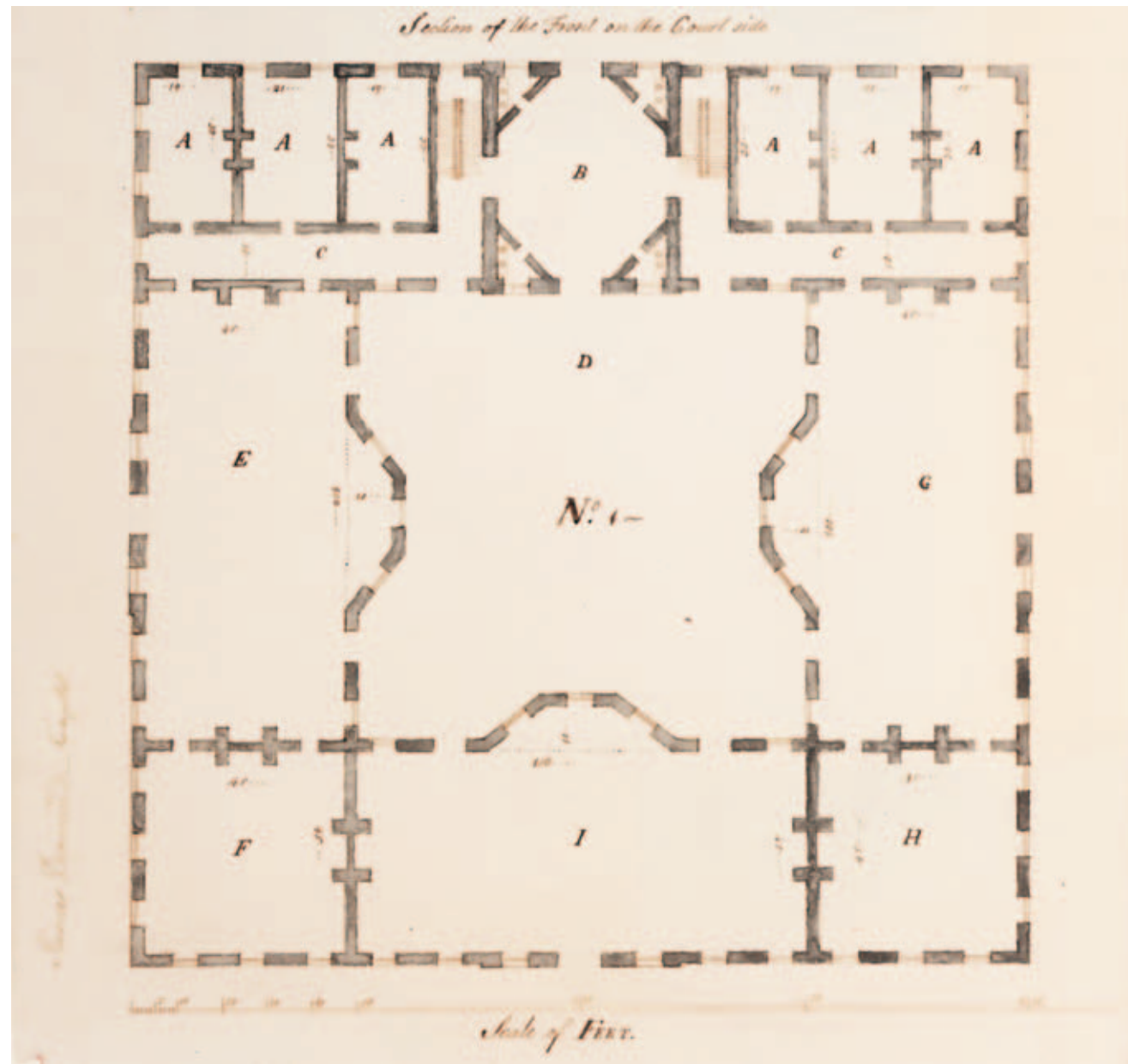
ELEVATION OF JAMES DIAMOND'S COMPETITIVE DESIGN.

Elevation for plan no. 2. MHS.



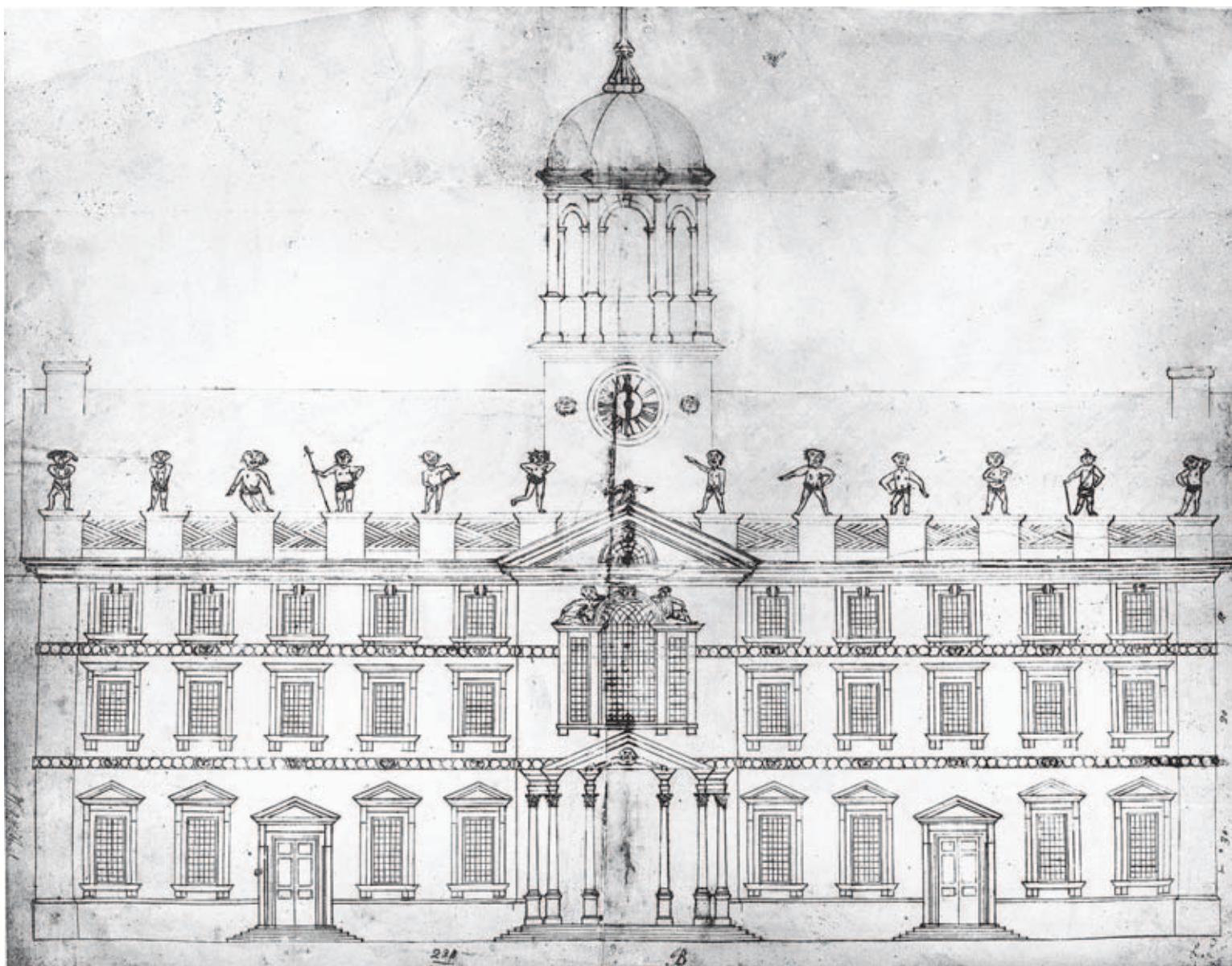
SECTION OF JAMES DIAMOND'S COMPETITIVE DESIGN.

Detail from the section and floor plan of "the Front on the Court Side, No. 1" for the Capitol. MHS.



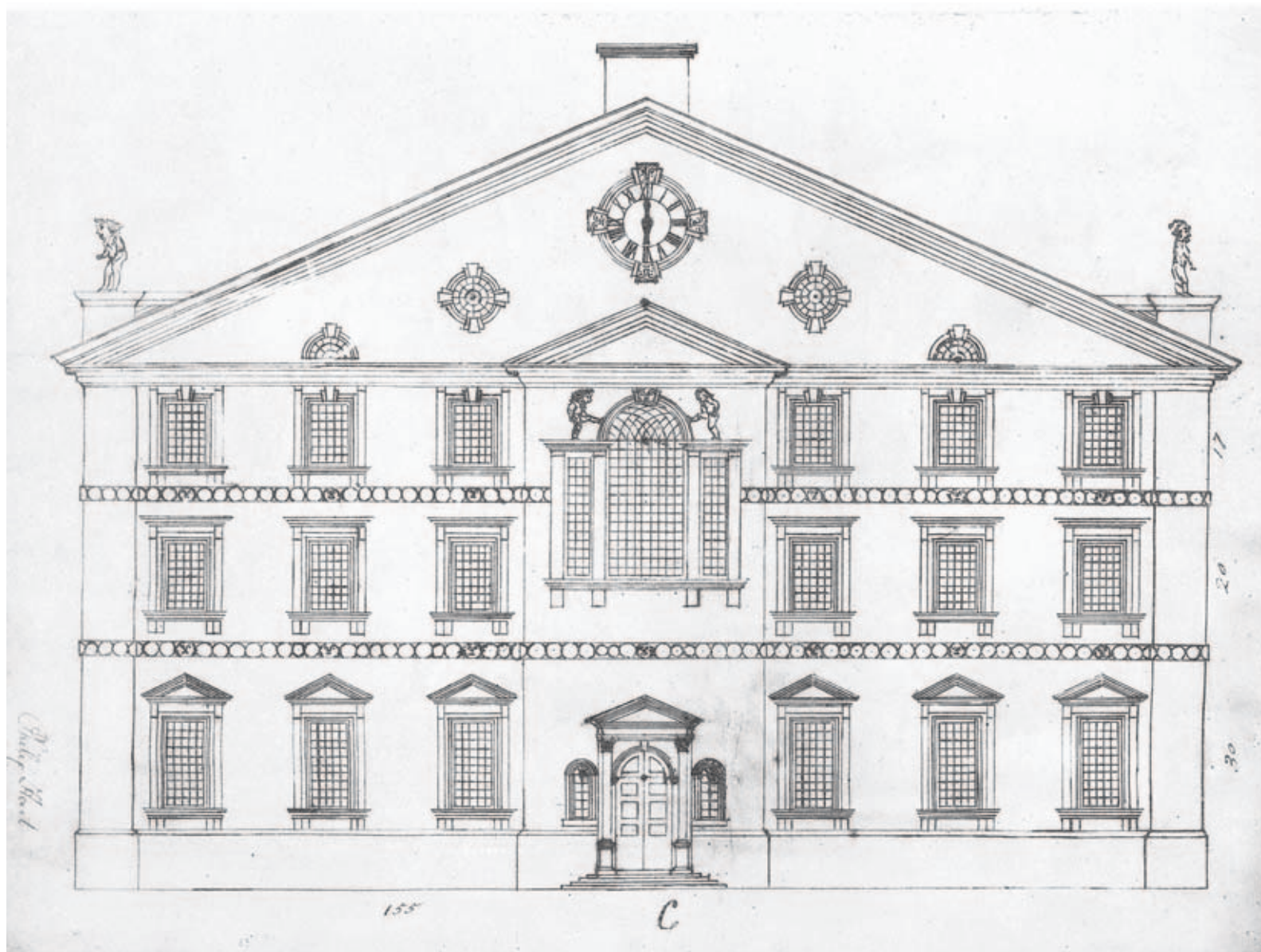
PLAN OF JAMES DIAMOND'S COMPETITIVE DESIGN.

Detail from the section and floor plan of "the Front on the Court Side, No. 1" for the Capitol. MHS.



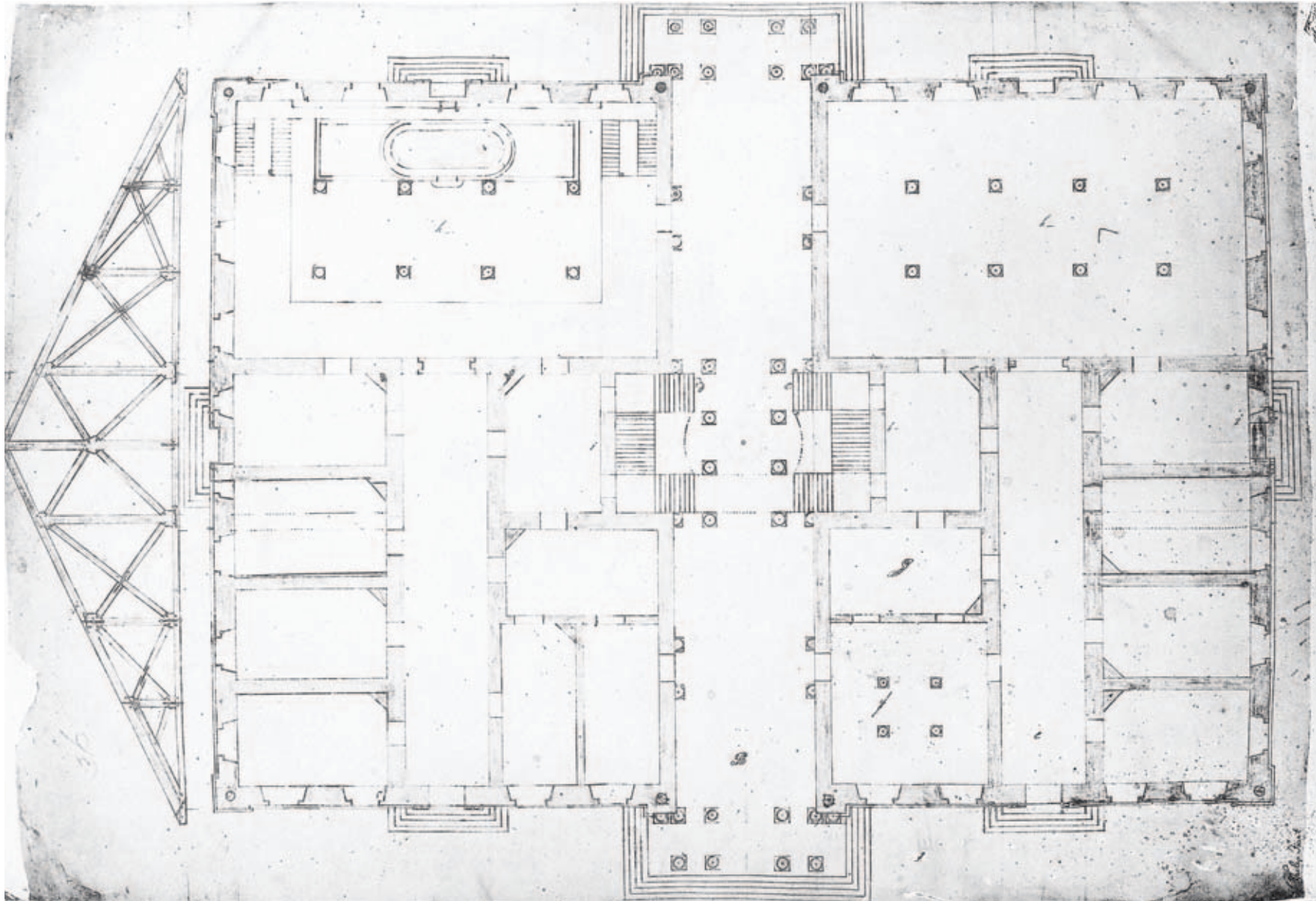
FRONT ELEVATION OF PHILIP HART'S COMPETITIVE DESIGN.

Front view of the Capitol "B." MHS.



END ELEVATION OF PHILIP HART'S COMPETITIVE DESIGN.

"C" end elevation of the Capitol. MHS.

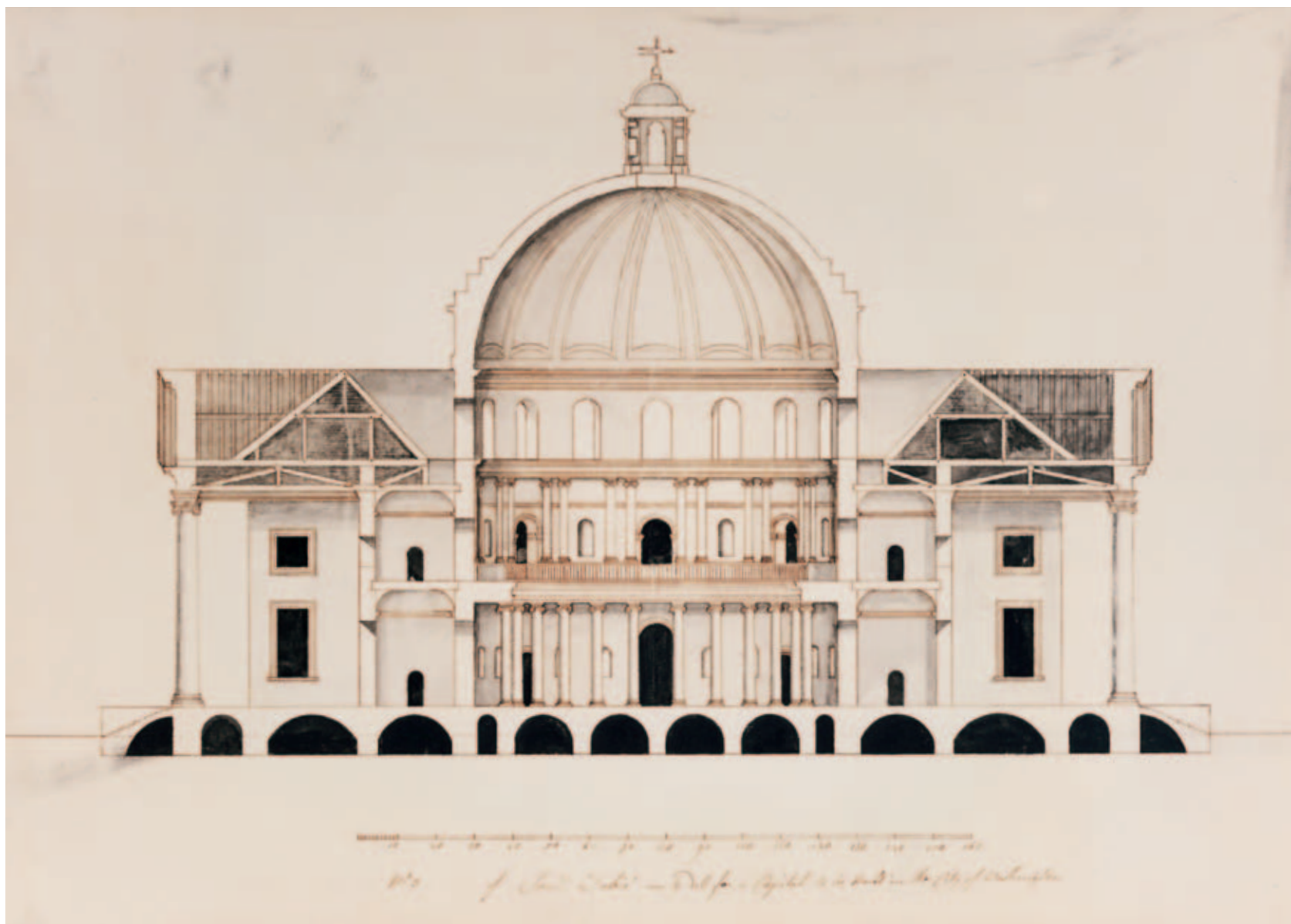


PLAN OF PHILIP HART'S COMPETITIVE DESIGN.
Floor plan and roof framing detail for the Capitol. *MHS.*



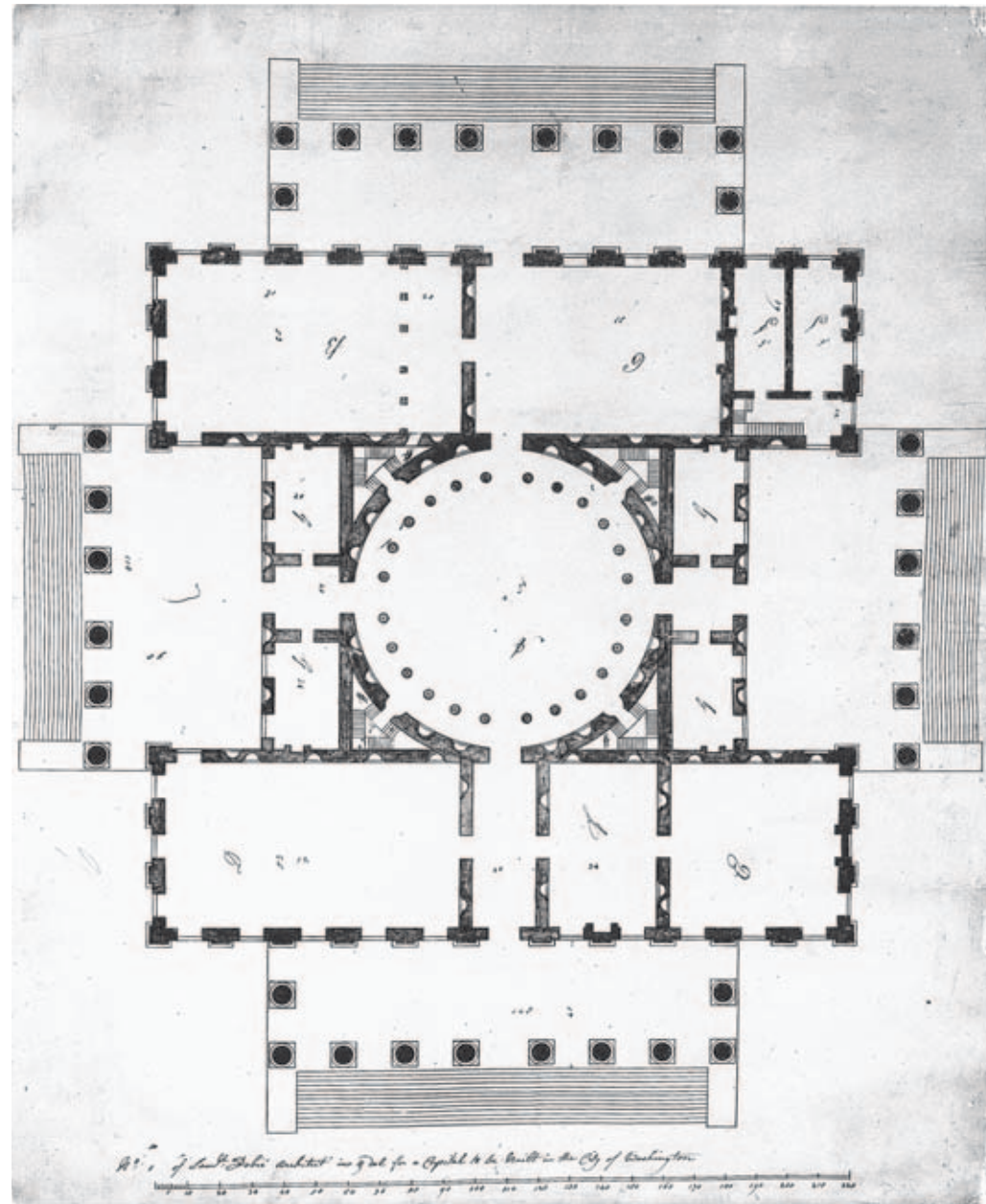
ELEVATION OF SAMUEL DOBIE'S COMPETITIVE DESIGN.

Elevation, no. 2. *MHS.*



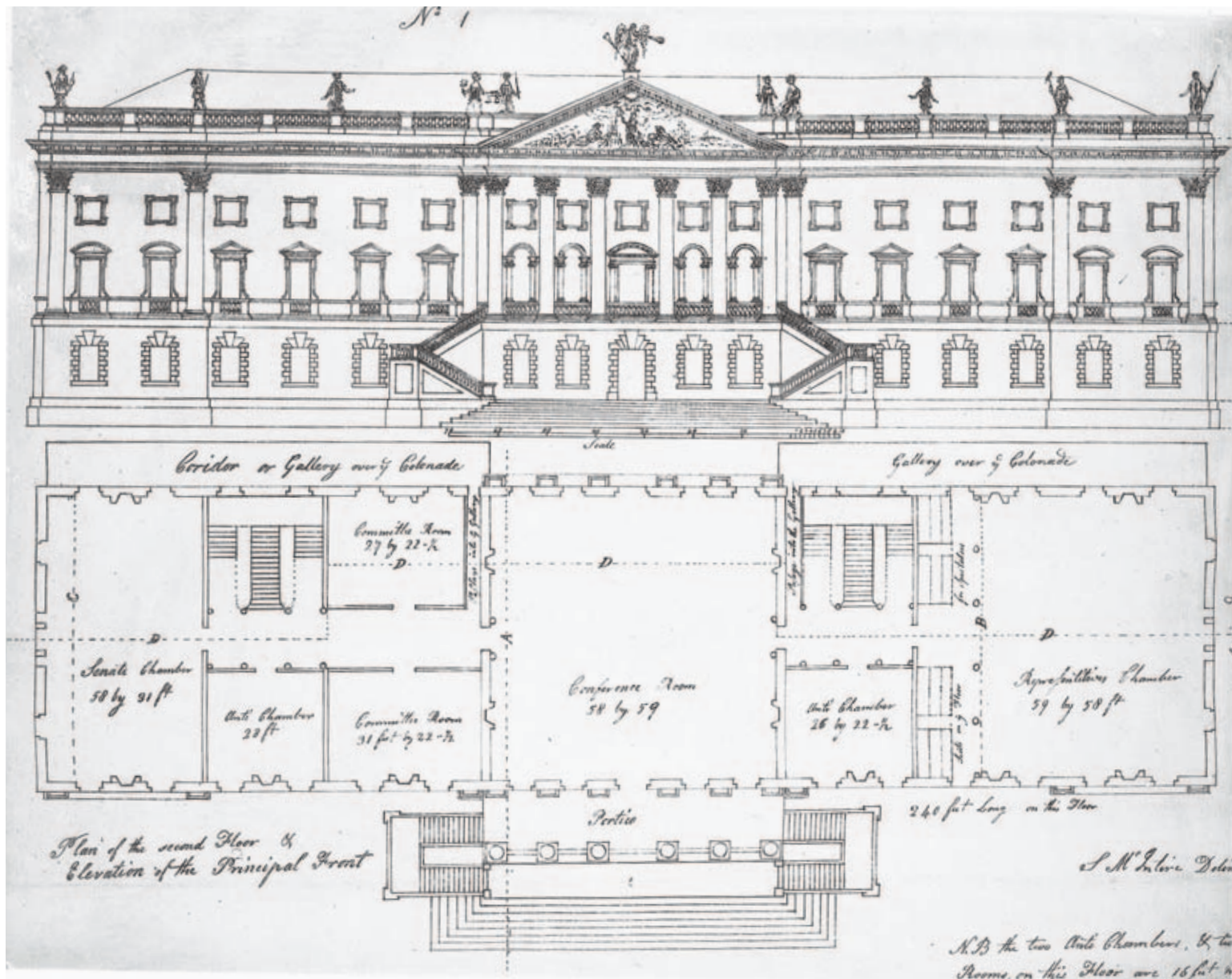
SECTION OF SAMUEL DOBIE'S COMPETITIVE DESIGN.

Section, no. 3. MHS.

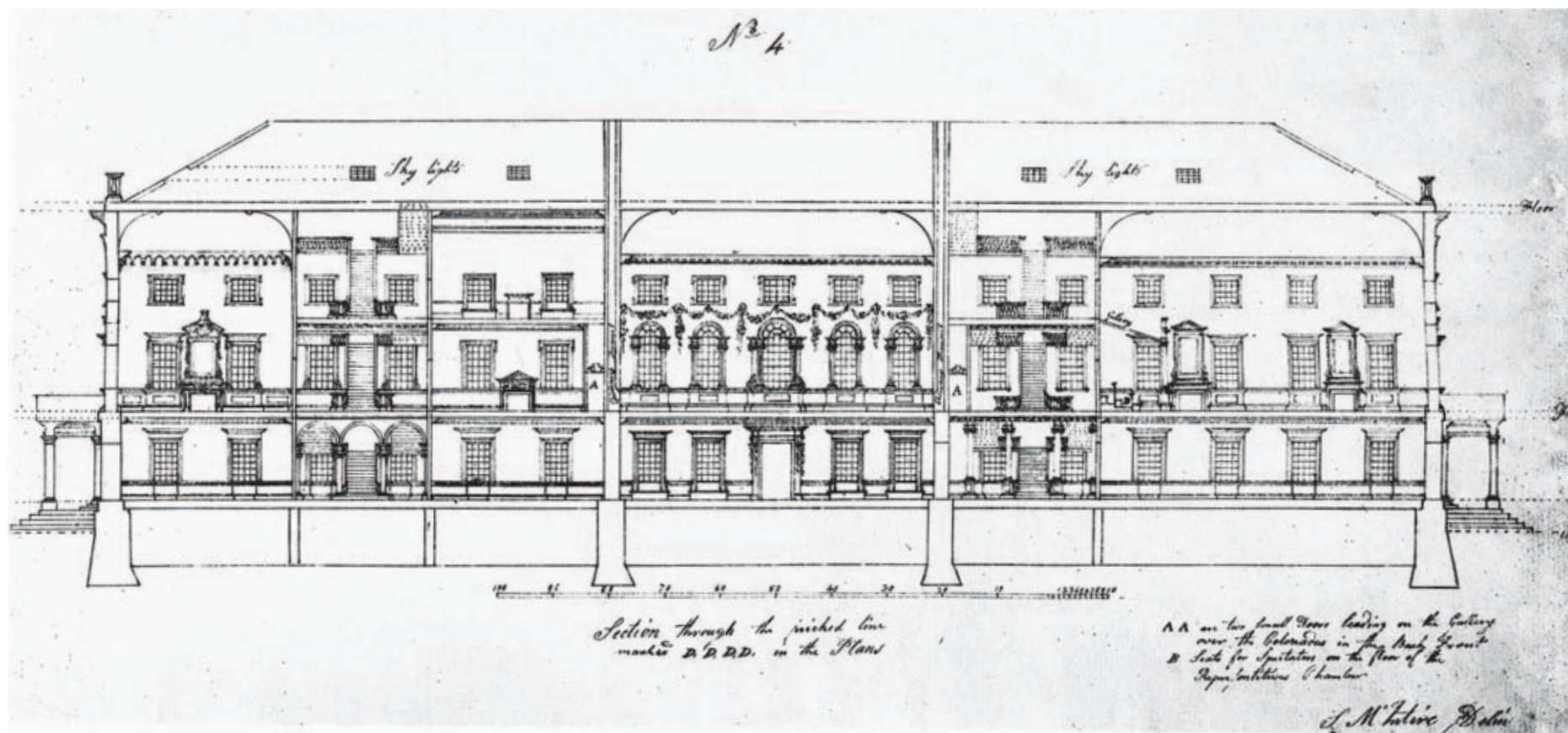


PLAN OF SAMUEL DOBIE'S COMPETITIVE DESIGN.

Floor plan, no. 1. MHS.



PLAN AND ELEVATION OF S. M. MCINTIRE'S COMPETITIVE PLAN.
No. 1 "Plan of the second Floor & Elevation of the Principal Front." MHS.



SECTION OF S. M. MCINTIRE'S COMPETITIVE PLAN.

No. 4 "Section Through the pricked line marked D, D, D, in the Plans." MHS.

to note the personal interest which President Washington took in the selection of the design. In fact, the decision seems to have rested almost entirely with him. On July 23, 1792, Washington wrote to the commissioners and commended Turner's plans as pleasing him better than any that had been so far submitted, but noting the same defects that existed in the other designs—the want of Executive Departments. Washington seems to have been particularly struck with the beauty and grandeur of the dome in the center. He thinks that if this plan should be adopted, the “pilastrade” ought to be carried around the semicircular projections at the ends. He suggests a location for the library and queries if Turner's plan could be surrounded by a colonnade like Hallet's. [“The roof of Hallet's, I must confess, is not to my taste.”] “If it were not too expensive, it would, in my judgment, be a noble and desirable structure; but I would have it understood, in this instance and always when I am hazarding a sentiment on these buildings, that I profess to have no knowledge of architecture, and think we should, to avoid criticism, be governed by the established rules which are laid down by the professors of the art.”¹³

As late as August 29, 1792, by a communication of the commissioners, it is shown that Samuel Blodgett and Hasbrough submitted drawings. Although there were points to be commended in Blodgett's, Turner's, and Hallet's, none was found suitable for adoption. So they submitted to the last-named competitors a revised schedule, in which they say: “Though limited in means, we want a plan a credit to the age in design and taste.”¹⁴ The commissioners of the District show throughout the correspondence a decided preference for Hallet and his plans. On September 1, 1792, they write to him, praising the drawings, and

stating that they have “strong expectations that they may, with mutual satisfaction, form lasting engagements, but present views may be crossed and nothing can be done until a plan of the Capitol is fixed.”¹⁵ November 2 Turner's drawings, probably those of the revised or second competition, were returned as not answering the purpose.¹⁶

October, 1792, Dr. William Thornton, of the island of Tortola, West Indies, wrote to the commissioners, requesting permission to submit drawings according to the first advertisement. November 15 the commissioners wrote to him stating that they would be pleased to look at his plans of the Capitol, and at the same time informing him of the fact that the premium for the architectural work on the President's House had been awarded to James Hoban. On December 4 of the same year they wrote Dr. Thornton another letter saying: “Your letter of the 9th is before us. Have to inform you that as none of the plans for the Capitol met with our entire approbation, Mr. Hallet, a French architect, was engaged to prepare one, which he tells us will be ready by the first of next month. As we shall then forward it immediately to the President, we think it will be best for you to lodge your plan with the Secretary of State for the President's inspection, who, when he returns Mr. Hallet's plans, will also send us yours.”¹⁷ Thornton had not presented his plan on December 13, 1792. On January 5, 1793, Hallet requested three more weeks in which to complete his drawings. The commissioners make a note of the fact that Hallet loses nothing in their estimation by failing to have his drawings completed in the time which he had specified. February 7, 1793, the fact was duly recorded that the

¹³ George Washington to the District of Columbia Commissioners, July 23, 1792, in John C. Fitzpatrick, ed., *The Writings of George Washington from the Original Manuscript Sources, 1745–1799* (Washington: Government Printing Office, 1939), vol. 32, 93–95.

¹⁴ Commissioners to Samuel Blodgett [Blodget], August 29, 1792, RG 42, DCC, NARA.

¹⁵ Commissioners to Stephen Hallet, September 1, 1792, RG 42, DCC, NARA.

¹⁶ Commissioners to George Turner, November 2, 1792, RG 42, DCC, NARA.

¹⁷ William Thornton first wrote to the Commissioners from Tortola on July 12, 1792. Daniel Carroll to William Thornton, November 15, 1792; Daniel Carroll and David Stuart to William Thornton, December 4, 1792, William Thornton Papers, vol. 1, 135 (microfilm), Manuscript Division, LC.

commissioners and others were generally satisfied with Thornton's plans for the Capitol, and note the sorrow they feel for Hallet, but think they will be able to employ him usefully, notwithstanding.¹⁸ March 3 Thornton came to Washington with an introduction from President Washington to the commissioners. In this letter Washington says of Thornton's plan: "Grandeur, simplicity, and convenience appear to be so well combined in this plan of Dr. Thornton's." Washington felt sure that it would meet the approbation of the commissioners, as it had been approved by all the best judges. As to the funds, "It should be considered that the external of the building will be the only immediate expense to be incurred; the internal work and many of the ornamental [parts] without may be finished gradually."¹⁹

Thomas Jefferson, Secretary of State, about this period says of this plan: "The grandeur, simplicity, and beauty of the exterior, the propriety with which the apartments are distributed, and the economy in the mass of the whole structure recommend this plan." A short time after, he says: "Thornton's plan had captivated the eyes and the judgment of all. It is simple, noble, beautiful, excellently arranged, and moderate in size. . . . Among its admirers none are more decided than he whose decision is most important."²⁰ The commissioners wrote to Washington March 11, after a thorough examination of Thornton's plan, that "the rooms for the different branches of Congress and the conference room are much to our satisfaction, and its outward appearance will be

striking and pleasing."²¹ They criticise the unnecessary number of small rooms, fear lack of light, and advocate reducing the number of rooms. They commend a grand scale for the building, but fear expense and debt will affect their standing before the world; at the same time are willing to leave it to the President's ideas of propriety.

The merits of the plans were practically settled March 13, for on this date the commissioners express their regrets to Hallet, and, as his plan was the most meritorious in the first competition, state that it was "our hope and wishes that you would carry the prize in the second competition. Our opinion has preferred Dr. Thornton's, and expect the President will confirm our choice." [Judging from letter of March 3, they might have felt assured of the fact.] "Neither could demand the prize under the terms of the competition. We determine to give Thornton \$500 and a lot worth £100. You certainly rank next."²²

The following letter explains itself:

GEORGETOWN, April 5, 1793.

SIR: The President has given his formal approbation of your plan.

You will therefore be pleased to grant powers or put the business in a way to be closed on the acknowledgments your success entitles you.

As soon as the nature of the work and your convenience will permit, we wish to be in possession of your explanations with the plan, for we wish to mark out the ground, make preparations, and even lay out the foundations this fall.

We are etc.,

T. JOHNSON.

DD. STUART.

DANL. CARROLL.²³

DR. WM. THORNTON, *Philadelphia*.

¹⁸ Proceedings, January 5 and February 7, 1793, RG 42, DCC, NARA.

¹⁹ George Washington to the Commissioners of the District of Columbia, March 3, 1793, in Fitzpatrick, *The Writings of George Washington*, vol. 32, 370–373.

²⁰ Thomas Jefferson to Mr. Carroll, February 1, 1793, in Padover, *Thomas Jefferson and the National Capital*, 171. Originally published in H. A. Washington, ed., *The Writings of Thomas Jefferson*, vol. 3 (Washington, 1853–54), 508.

²¹ Commissioners to George Washington, March 11, 1793, RG 42, DCC, NARA.

²² Commissioners to Stephen Hallet, March 13, 1793, RG 42, DCC, NARA.

²³ Commissioners to William Thornton, April 5, 1793, RG 42, DCC, NARA.

One fact is to be noted in connection with the competitions for the Capitol—the evident desire of the commissioners to employ Hallet in some way, so they could remunerate him for the time spent on the plans at their request. In the second competition he was practically working under the commissioners’ personal instruction and supervision for six months, from July, 1792, to February, 1793, with a guaranty of expenses and liberal indemnity [July 17, 1792]. Nothing gives stronger evidence of the exceptional merit of Thornton’s plan than its power to overcome the personal equation and interest of the commissioners in the plan of Hallet. Unfortunately, neither Thornton’s nor Hallet’s first plan, so far as I have been able to discover, is in existence, so we can not pass judgment upon their merits or demerits. There is a plan of Hallet’s made in July, 1793, which, judging from one of Washington’s letters, is closely on the lines of Hallet’s competitive design [Plate 18] and numerous letters assert that later plans of Thornton were mere modifications of Thornton’s original scheme [Plates 28 to 31]. From these designs it can be easily seen that Hallet’s capacity in both planning and designing was far inferior to the ideas of Thornton both in utility, proportion, and refinement of details.²⁴

²⁴ Brown incorrectly dates this drawing [Plate 18], relying on the original notation on the back of the drawing which read “A1 Plan of the Ground and Principal Floor of the Federal Capitol Sent to Philadelphia to the Board July 1793. S. Hallet.” Correspondence indicated the drawing was in fact Hallet’s first competition plan, “A,” forwarded to the Commissioners by Jefferson, July 11, 1792. The error was first noted in Wells Bennett’s discussion of the dating of Hallet’s drawings in “Stephen Hallet and His Designs for the National Capitol, 1791–1797,” 327–330. See also Alexandra Cushing Howard, “Stephen Hallet and William Thornton at the U.S. Capitol, 1791–1797” (Master’s thesis, University of Virginia, 1974), 144–145. Both Bennett and Howard challenge Brown’s opinion of Hallet’s ability and his contributions to the design of the Capitol. Howard provides a valuable inventory of the Hallet and Thornton drawings in an appendix to her thesis. For a more recent study of Hallet’s design contribution to the Capitol, see Pamela Scott, “Stephen Hallet’s Designs for the United States Capitol,” *Winterthur Portfolio* 27 (Summer/Autumn 1992): 145–170.

By one of Thornton’s letters we learn that he was offered the position of superintendent of this work, but declined.²⁵ The commissioners expected the superintendent to devote his entire time to this object.

The commissioners at this point (April 10, 1793) in the history of the building made the serious error of appointing Hallet (as payment to him for the time and trouble he had given to working on the Capitol) to make an estimate of the cost and study of Thornton’s plan of the Capitol. We can easily imagine the avidity with which Thornton’s principal competitor studied the drawings to find the minutest defects, and he, as was probably expected, made out a list of insuperable objections to its execution.

Hallet, Blodgett, Williamson, and Carstairs, all competitors, seemed to have combined, being on the spot, and urged the rejection of Thornton’s plan. Soon after the above date, Hallet was employed to superintend the erection of the building. Instead of doing this, he seems to have spent his time in searching for defects and proposing alterations of the adopted plan. George Alfred Townsend, in his book *Washington Inside and Out*, published in 1873, takes decided grounds, giving Hallet the credit for designing the old Capitol. He mentions several drawings of Hallet’s which are in the possession of the Congressional Library. A great number, if not all, of these drawings were made when Hallet was employed, after the selection of Thornton’s plan, in a persistent effort to induce Washington and the commissioners to accept some of Hallet’s ideas.²⁶

²⁵ William Thornton made this assertion in a printed letter to the Members of the House of Representatives, January 1, 1805, vols. 3–4, William Thornton Papers, Manuscript Division, LC.

²⁶ George Alfred Townsend, *Washington Outside and Inside: A Picture and a Narrative of the Origin, Growth, Excellences, Abuses, Beauties, and Personages of Our Governing City* (Hartford, Conn.: James Betts and Company, 1873), 56–74. This work, although containing several significant errors in its account of the design authorship of the Capitol, became a standard source for other writers. See, for instance, James Q. Howard, “Architects of the

Because a note on one of the drawings says Thornton sent for the elevation and plan, according to Townsend, Edward Clark, the present Architect of the Capitol, assumed that Thornton copied this drawing and turned it out as his own. They seem to have overlooked the fact that Thornton prepared his drawings in the West Indies, and at the period that this drawing of Hallet's was made Thornton's design was the accepted one, and he was most anxious to prevent its being modified.²⁷

Hallet, in a footnote, says: "The President having seen this accidentally in September, 1793, agreed with the commissioners to have the Capitol planned in imitation thereof." All the documentary evidence is contradictory of this assertion, and proves that Washington was always in favor of the Thornton plan, a modification of which will be shown later [Plates 28 to 31].

The following letter from President Washington gives a very clear account of the condition of affairs at this date. The commissioners, on

June 22, were awaiting this letter from Washington, showing that they were aware of the importunity of Hallet and others:

MOUNT VERNON, *June 30, 1793.*

DEAR SIR: You will find by inclosed letter from the commissioners that Mr. Hallet reports unfavorably of Dr. Thornton's plan "on the great points of practicability, time, and expense," and that I am referred to Mr. Blodgett, Hoban, and Hallet, whose verbal information will be better than any we can give you on which to form ultimate instructions. Mr. Blodgett I met at Baltimore at the moment I was about to leave it, consequently I had little conversation with him on the subject referred to; but Mr. Hallet is of opinion that the execution of Thornton's plan (independent of the cost, which would far exceed our means and the time allowed for the accomplishment of the building) is impracticable; would not in some parts answer the ends proposed. Mr. Hoban seemed

American Capitol," *International Review* 1 (November–December 1874): 736–753. The discovery of such errors encouraged Brown to revive the case for Thornton as the original designer of the Capitol.

²⁷ Brown's discussion of the "Tortola scheme" was first published in 1896 in his article, "Dr. William Thornton, Architect," *Architectural Record* 6 (July 1896): 53–70. Brown identified a drawing loaned to him by Architect of the Capitol Edward Clark as Thornton's competition design for the President's House. He based his conclusion on a letter dated July 12, 1792, written by Thornton from Tortola, British Virgin Islands, which stated that he had made competition plans for both the President's House and the Capitol. Brown also assumed that the strong resemblance of the drawing to a British country residence precluded it from being Thornton's first Capitol design. He explained in the article that it was "difficult to understand the plan from the elevations." Brown was thus unaware of two unsigned floor plans that correlated to this elevation then in the possession of Thornton heir J. Henley Smith. The plans were later discovered by Fiske Kimball and Wells Bennett in the Thornton papers, donated to the Library of Congress in 1903 (see their 1923 article, "William Thornton and the Design of the Capitol," 76–92). Kimball and Wells mistakenly believed Brown had obtained the elevations from a Thornton descendant. Since this discovery the elevation drawings have been commonly identified by architectural historians

as Thornton's "Tortola scheme." These elevations were never actually submitted to the commissioners. It is not known how Edward Clark came into possession of the drawings or why he did not deposit the drawings in the Library of Congress as he did with the Hallet drawings received from B. H. Latrobe, Jr., in 1871.

A sampling of guidebooks of the nation's capital from the 1830s to the 1870s indicates that confusion long existed over the identity of the original designer of the Capitol. Jonathan Elliot noted in 1830 that Hallet was the first architect and did not mention Thornton. Robert Mills, who was a student and assistant of Latrobe from 1803 to 1808, credited Thornton with the original design, but claimed Hallet, whom he mistakenly identified as an Englishman, "modified it in some of its parts." Bohn's 1856 guidebook cited Hallet while an 1872 guidebook cited Thornton. See Jonathan Elliot, *Historical Sketches of the Ten Miles Square Forming the District of Columbia* (Washington: Printed by J. Elliot, Jr., 1830), 107; Robert Mills, *Guide to the Capitol of the United States Embracing Every Information Useful to the Visitor Whether Business or Pleasure* (Washington: privately printed, 1834), 58; Bohn's *Handbook of Washington Beautifully Illustrated With Steel Engravings of All the Public Buildings and Government Statuary* (Washington: Cashmir Bohn, 1856), 12; *The National Capital Explained and Illustrated, A Convenient Guide to All Points of Interest in the City of Washington* (Washington: Devlin and Company, 1872), 14.

to concur in this, and Mr. Blodgett, as far as I could come at his sentiments in the short time I was with him, approved the alterations in it which have been proposed by Mr. Hallet.

It is unlucky that this investigation of Dr. Thornton's plan and estimate of the cost had not preceded the adoption of it, but knowing the impatience of the Carrollsburg interest and the anxiety of the public to see both buildings progressing, and supposing the plan to be correct, it was adjudged best to avoid delay. It is better, however, to correct the error, though late, than to proceed in a ruinous measure, in the adoption of which I do not hesitate to confess that I was governed by the beauty of the exterior and the distribution of the apartments, declaring then, as I do now, that I had no knowledge in the rules or principles of architecture, and was equally unable to count the cost. But if there be such material defects as are represented and such immense time and cost to complete the building, it would be folly in the extreme to proceed on the plan which has been adopted.

It has appeared to me proper, however, before it is laid aside, and justice and respect to Dr. Thornton require, that the objections should be made known to him, and an opportunity afforded to explain and obviate them if he can.

For this reason, and because Mr. Blodgett is in Philadelphia, and it might not be convenient for Dr. Thornton to leave it, I requested Mr. Hallet and Mr. Hoban to repair without delay to Philadelphia with all the plans and documents which are necessary to elucidate the subject, and do pray you to get all the parties herein named together and, after hearing the objections and explanations, report your opinion on the case and the plan which ought to have been executed. Nothing can be done to the foundation until a final decision is had, and this decision ought not to be delayed one moment that can be avoided, because time is wasting fast, because the public expectation is alive, and because the demon of jealousy may be at work in the lower town, when one building is seen

to progress rapidly and a plan for the other not yet decided on. Whether it be practicable [even at an expense] to call in the aid of any other scientific character in Philadelphia to assist in deciding this point, or whether there be any there, is more than I can tell. Your own knowledge of this and judgment will decide.

The case is important. A plan must be adopted and, good or bad, it must be entered upon.

With great regard, I am, dear sir, your affectionate and obedient servant,

GEORGE WASHINGTON.²⁸

To Secretary of State THOMAS JEFFERSON.

By order of the commissioners, acting on President Washington's letter, a commission was appointed July 17, 1793, to examine and report upon objections to the adopted plans.

In the meantime Hallet had drawn what he considered proper modifications of Thornton's design. [Plates 15, 16, 17.] The following are the objections which he raised:

1. Intercolumniation of western and central peristyle too wide for supports of stone; so are those of door and wing.
2. Colonnade in middle of conference room objectionable; if taken away, room too large for roof span.
3. The floor of central peristyle too wide to support itself.
4. Stairways on each side of conference room want headroom.
5. Windows in some important instances masked by the galleries.
6. Many parts of the building want light and air.

²⁸ George Washington to Thomas Jefferson, June 30, 1793, in Padover, *Thomas Jefferson and the National Capital*, 181–183.

On this board were Thornton, Hoban, Hallet, Williamson, and Carstairs [the three latter were competitors of Thornton's].²⁹

Thomas Jefferson writes to Washington that the board reported that they considered the objections insurmountable without alteration of the plans. The necessary alterations were shown in the drawings made by Mr. Hallet [presumably between April 10 and July 17], "wherein he has preserved the most valuable ideas of the original and rendered them acceptable of execution, so that it is considered Dr. Thornton's plan rendered into practical form. Those persons consulted agreed that in the reformed plan the objections were entirely remedied and it was a work of great merit," and would cost about half of the first one. Plates 15, 16, and 17 show Hallet's modification of Thornton's design.³⁰

In remedying objection 6, Hallet suppressed the portico on the eastern front. Commissioners thought this should be restored as in the

original plan and overruled Hallet's change. Hallet's remedy for objection 5, i.e., placing windows on different levels, was overruled.

Colonel Williamson, undertaker [the old term for builder], after thorough consideration agreed with Thornton that all objections were removable without any alterations in the plans.³¹

July 25 Washington agrees with the action of the commissioners, but insists strenuously on retaining the eastern portico.

Washington on same date says: "The recess which Mr. Hallet proposes in that front strikes everyone that has viewed the plan unpleasantly. . . and it has been intimated that the reason of his proposing the recess, instead of the portico, is to make it in one essential feature different from Dr. Thornton's plan."³²

Only four of the original objections remained; three of these had reference to size and would probably have been easily surmountable by an engineer of that or this day, as Thornton asserted. The judges were

²⁹ These objections had not been raised by Hallet alone as Brown implies. The opening of Jefferson's letter, which Brown does not quote, is important: "According [to] the desire expressed in your letter of June 30, I called together Doctr. Thornton, Mr. Hallet, Mr. Hoban [sic], and a judicious undertaker of this place, Mr. Carstairs, chosen by Dr. Thornton as a competent judge of the objections made to this plan of the Capitol for the city of Washington." Jefferson to Washington, July 17, 1793, in Padover, *Thomas Jefferson and the National Capital*, 184–186.

³⁰ Brown is mistaken in identifying this group as Hallet's modification of Thornton's design. The drawings were Hallet's design "E," so called because of the notation on the section: "No. 5 . . . E₆ Section of Plan E₁, S. Hallet." The drawings, dating from January to March 1793, are important to the design history of the early Capitol because they contain many of the elements that appear in Hallet's "conference plan" as well as Thornton's later designs. Most scholars agree that the "E" design group was developed independently by Hallet and not derived from Thornton's competition scheme as Brown contends here. Yet there remains some skepticism about the originality of the design because of radical changes from Hallet's past designs. See Howard, "Stephen Hallet and William Thornton at the U.S. Capitol, 1791–1797," 153–155; and Don Alexander Hawkins, "William Thornton's Lost Design of the United States Capitol: A Study and Reconstruction," unpublished paper on file at the Curator's Office, AOC, 105.

³¹ This was not Williams's [Brown calls him Williamson] first reaction, and Brown has been justly criticized for omitting a key passage in this letter and shading the interpretation to minimize contemporary objective criticism of Thornton's plans. The letter also stated: "I need not repeat to you the opinions of Col. Williams an undertaker also produced by Dr. Thornton, who on seeing the plans and hearing the objections proposed, thought some of them removable, others not so, and on the whole that the reformed plan was the best. This part in your presence, and with a declaration at the same time from Col. Williams that he wished no stress be laid on opinions so suddenly given but he called on me the day after, told me he had considered and conferred with Dr. Thornton on the objections, and thought all of them could be removed but the want of light and air in some cases." Col. Williams was Philadelphia contractor William Williams (ca. 1749–1794). Sandra L. Tatman and Roger W. Moss, *Biographical Dictionary of Philadelphia Architects: 1700–1930* (Boston, Mass.: G. K. Hall & Co., 1985), 854–856.

³² George Washington to the Commissioners of the District of Columbia, July 25, 1793, in Fitzpatrick, *The Writings of George Washington*, vol. 33, 29–30. Brown omits Washington's statement in this letter that "after a candid discussion, it was found that the objections stated, were considered as valid by both the persons chosen by Doctor Thornton as practical Architects and competent judges of things of this kind."

two biased builders and two biased architects.³³ Objection 4 could certainly have been remedied without material alteration of the plans. Hallet's so-called "modification" of this plan seems to have ended simply in a proportionate reduction of the size of the building. Nowhere is it even hinted that the changes were made on the lines of Hallet's original or second plan, which he was unable to make satisfactory, with all the assistance he had from the commissioners.

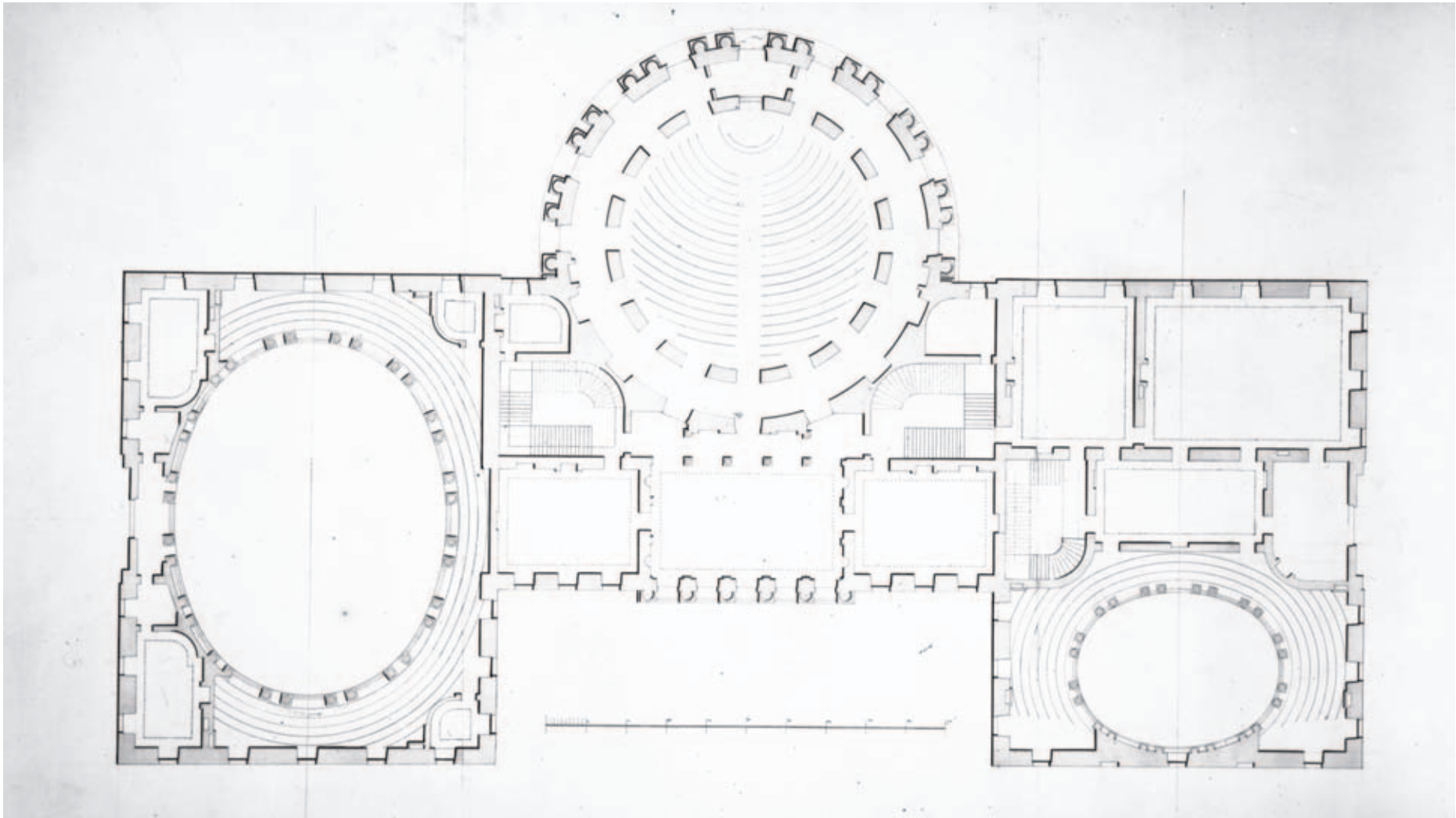
Hallet made persistent and determined efforts to secure authority for a radical change in the design of the Capitol, as he submitted scheme after scheme, making elaborate drawings for a greater part of

the year. July, 1793, he submitted to the commissioners a plan which, judging from description, must have been very similar to his competitive design [Plate 18]. October, 1793, he submitted a totally different scheme, with elevations, sections, and plan [Plates 19, 20, and 21]. As late as January, 1794, he submitted still another set of drawings for approval [Plates 22, 23, and 24].³⁴

The transactions and letters of the commissioners and of President Washington do not even indicate that these several schemes were requested or desired; they simply show an earnest desire on the part of Hallet to introduce a design which he might claim as his own.

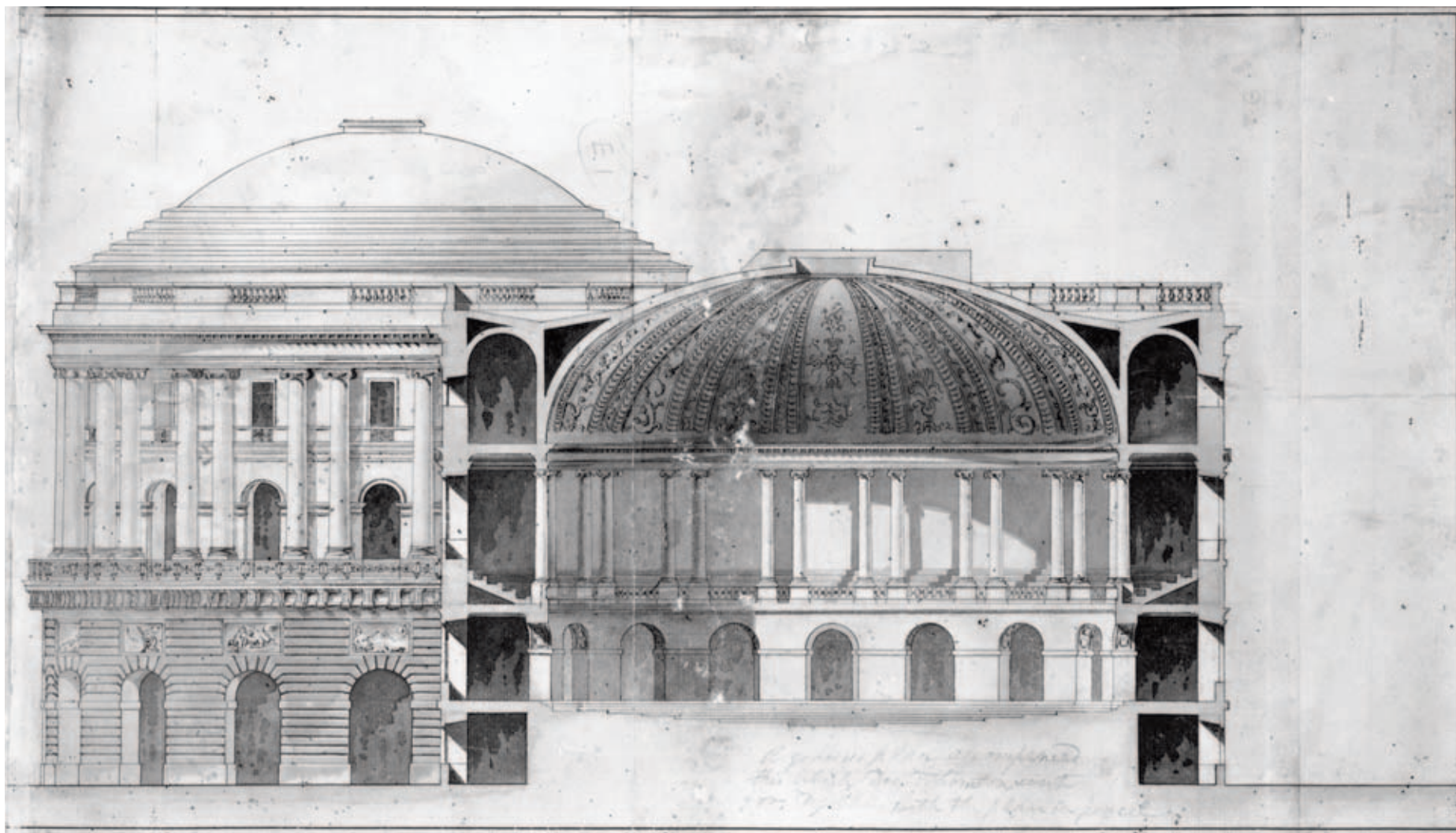
³³ Brown's charge of bias is exaggerated since only Thomas Carstairs was connected to the Capitol competition. William Williams had no interest in the Capitol other than his critique of the conference plan. Both men were Thornton's choices as judges. James Hoban was not a competitor and had no ambitions to design the Capitol. Hallet was the only person with a strong motive to replace Thornton's design.

³⁴ Brown's interpretation of Hallet's attempts to supplant Thornton may have been fueled by his misreading of the groupings and dating of Hallet's drawings. Brown's organization and dating of Hallet's proposed Capitol plan, section, and elevation drawings [19, 19a, 19b, 20, 21, 22, 23, and 24] were demonstrated to be in error by Wells Bennett, "Stephen Hallet and His Designs for the National Capitol, 1791–1794," 327–330. Brown's errors in identifying Hallet's drawings were for the most part due to his reliance on Hallet's inscriptions on the drawings, which Bennett proved through his documentary research to be dated late by one year. For a description and analysis of the Hallet drawings, see Howard, "Stephen Hallet and William Thornton at the U.S. Capitol, 1791–1797," 113; 141–166.



HALLET'S MODIFICATION OF THORNTON'S PLAN.

Ground plan, 1793, design "E." Scholarship undertaken since the 1970s documents that Hallet is the sole author of the Capitol's ground plan, section and elevation illustrated in plates 15, 16, and 17.
Prints and Photographs Division, LC.



HALLET'S MODIFICATION OF THORNTON'S DESIGN.

Cross section, undated (ca. 1793), Design "E6." *Prints and Photographs Division, LC.*



ELEVATION, HALLET'S MODIFICATION OF THORNTON'S DESIGN.

Rear elevation, 1793, Hallet's design "E" for the Capitol. *Prints and Photographs Division, LC.*