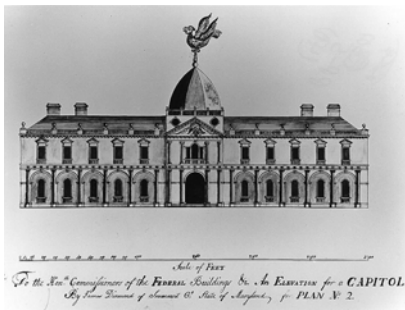


United States Capitol Building

Washington, DC

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Client: United States Government
Completed: 1793
Cost: \$412,000



Background

The United States Capitol is the capitol building that serves as the seat of government for the United States Congress, the legislative branch of the U.S. federal government. It is located in Washington, D.C., on top of Capitol Hill at the east end of the National Mall. Although not in the geographic center of the District of Columbia, the Capitol is the focus by which the quadrants of the district are divided. Curiously, the west face, which is often taken to be the "front" of the building, is actually its "back"; the true front is the east face.

The building was originally designed by William Thornton. This plan was subsequently modified by Stephen Hallet, Benjamin Latrobe and then Charles Bulfinch. The current dome and the House and Senate wings were designed by Thomas U. Walter and August Schoenborn, a German immigrant, and were completed under the supervision of Edward Clark.

Construction

The site for the United States Capitol chosen by Pierre Charles L'Enfant was Jenkins Hill, which rose 88 feet (27 m) above the Potomac River. The site is one mile (1.6 km) from the White House. Pierre-Charles L'Enfant secured the lease of quarries at Wigginton Island and along Aquia Creek in Virginia for use in the foundations and outer walls of the Capitol in November 1791.

In 1792, a contest was announced by Commissioners of the Federal City seeking designs for both the Congress House and the President's House. The contest deadline was July 15, 1792, with rewards including \$500 and a lot in the city. All the drawings submitted were considered inadequate and rejected. The most promising of the submissions was by Stephen Hallet. However, a late entry by amateur architect William Thornton was submitted on January 31, 1793 to much praise by President George Washington and Secretary of State Thomas Jefferson. Thornton was inspired by the east front of the Louvre, as well as the Pantheon for the center portion of the design. Thornton's design was officially approved in a letter, dated April 5, 1793, from George Washington. In effort to console Hallet, the commissioners appointed him to review Thornton's plans, develop cost estimates, and serve as superintendent of construction. Hallet proceeded to pick apart and make drastic changes to Thornton's design, which he saw as amateur with numerous problems and high costs to build. Jefferson appointed a five-member commission, including Hallet and James Hoban, to address problems with and revise Thornton's plan. Except for some details in Thornton's plan that specified an open recess in the center of the East front, the revised plan was accepted.

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