
CHAPTER XVII

THE TERRACES AND LANDSCAPE WORK

FREDERICK LAW OLNSTED, *Landscape Architect*

THE first scheme for landscape work to surround the new building was a drawing [Plate 254] submitted by Thomas U. Walter in his report of 1864.¹ This plan necessitated the purchase of additional ground on the north and south of the Capitol. Plate 255 gives the area, with the certificate of Randolph Coyle, surveyor; the chairman of the Senate Committee on Public Buildings and Grounds, J. A. Bayard, and the chairman of the House committee, Edward Ball. The bill for this purchase passed the Senate in 1866, but it was not until 1873, under the act of March 3, 1872, that the grading was commenced.²

In his report of November, 1873, Edward Clark recommended the employment of a landscape architect to lay out the grounds.

By act of June 23, 1874, the improvement of the grounds was placed in charge of Frederick Law Olmsted, of Brookline, Mass.³ His first recommendation was for a broad plaza east of the Capitol, with marble terraces and a grand stairway on the west to replace the earth

terraces and the old stairway which were in existence at this period. The scheme, with the walks, terraces, retaining walls, and entrance ways, is shown in Plate 256. The work of grading, making walks, low boundary walls, ornamental piers for lamps, and entrance ways continued through the years 1875 to 1881, when the work which related to the grounds was completed, but no appropriation had been made to build the marble terraces and stairway. In the report of F. L. Olmsted, October, 1881, he urges an appropriation for these items of the scheme as approved by the act of 1874.⁴ The designs for the architectural features of the grounds and terraces were made by Thomas Wisedell, an architect working under Mr. Olmsted's instruction. The active work on the terraces was commenced in 1883. The work on the western terrace and principal stairway was awarded to the Vermont Marble Company in 1887. The foundations for this portion of the terrace consisted of 194 wells sunk to solid ground and filled with concrete, with an average depth of 20 feet. In Mr. Olmsted's report of July 1, 1885, he states that

¹ "Report of the Architect of the Capitol Extension," in *Report of the Secretary of the Interior* (Washington: Government Printing Office, 1864), 689–696.

² "An Act Making Appropriations for the Legislative, Executive, and Judicial Expenses of the Government for the Year Ending June 30, 1873, and for Other Purposes," 42nd Cong., 2nd sess., in *United States Statutes at Large*, vol. 17, 83.

³ "An Act Making Appropriations for Sundry Civil Expenses of the Government for the Fiscal Year Ending June 30, 1875, and for Other Purposes," contains the following passage: "For improvement of the Capitol Grounds, according to the plans and under the general direction of Fred. Law Olmsted, to be expended by the Architect of the Capitol, \$200,000." Act of March 21, 1874, entitled "An Act Making an Appropriation for a Topographical Survey of the Capitol Grounds and Plans for Improving the Same," 43rd

Cong., 1st sess., *United States Statutes at Large*, vol. 18, pt. 3, 23 and 214, states: "Be it enacted by the Senate and House of Representatives of the United States of America in Congress assembled, That the sum of \$3,000 or so much thereof as may be necessary be and the same is hereby appropriated out of any money in the Treasury not otherwise appropriated, to be expended under the direction of the Committees on Public Buildings and Grounds of the Senate and House of Representatives in procuring a topographical survey of the Capitol grounds and the employment of Fred. Law Olmsted [sic], of New York, in furnishing plans for laying out, improving and enclosing the same."

⁴ See *Annual Report of the Architect of the United States Capitol. Including Capitol Grounds, Court-house, Public Printing Office, and Plans for School-houses for the District of Columbia for the Fiscal Year Ending June 30, 1881* (Washington: Government Printing Office, 1881), 14–15.

because of the purely architectural character of the terraces they should be constructed under the sole responsibility of the Architect of the Capitol, and therefore he retires from the supervision of the construction of this portion of the work.⁵ The marble and granite work on the terraces is mentioned in the report of July 1, 1890, as being completed, but the balustrade of the stairways and the connection of the terraces with the main building were not finished until 1892.⁶ Plate 257 gives an enlarged view, showing the top of the terraces with the open area ways between the terrace rooms and the building. The area under the terraces was divided into 93 rooms [Plate 258]. The rooms were lighted either by windows facing the areas or by pavement lights on the walks of the terrace above. The arrangement of these rooms in the central portion of the west terrace was modified so as to provide a greater number of rooms with exterior windows on the court, which could be utilized as committee rooms [Plate 259]. The marble terrace, with its solid wall surface which makes it legitimately a part of the building, is vastly more impressive and justifies the sacrifice of direct windows in the rooms overlooking the grounds. This was accomplished only by a determined effort on the part of Mr. Olmsted, who insisted on the artistic being superior to the utilitarian in this imposing structure.

The stairways, open court, and plaza are very effective in the simple and dignified treatment adopted [Plate 260] and shown in the perspective drawing submitted by Mr. Olmsted. The western views of the building [Plates 261, 262] have been remarkably improved by this work. Where formerly the building apparently rested on a steep earth embankment, the stonework now reaches the level ground, and while

⁵ See *Annual Report of the Architect of the United States Capitol*. [For the Fiscal Year Ending June 30, 1885.] (Washington: Government Printing Office, 1885), 5–6.

⁶ *Report of the Architect of the United States Capitol to the Secretary of the Interior, 1890* (Washington: Government Printing Office, 1892), 4.

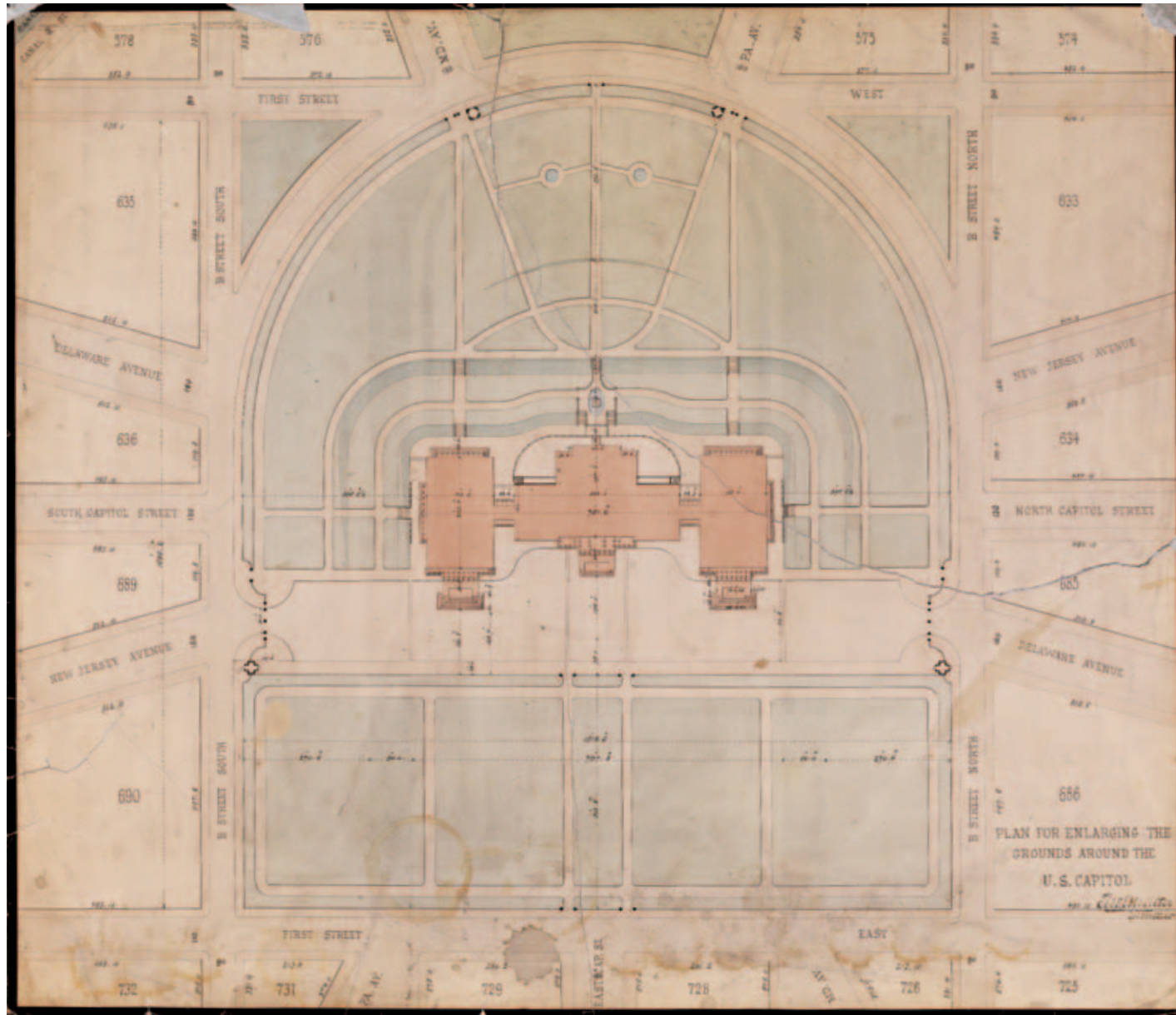
it adds to the apparent height of the building it also gives the appearance of a more stable foundation. While the effect of the landscape work in detail and as a whole is to be highly commended, giving many pleasing views of planting both in shrubbery and trees, as well as broad and effective lawns and imposing walks and plazas, the designs of the walls, lamp-posts at the entrances [Plates 263, 264], and other architectural details, though in many cases interesting in themselves, are not in harmony with the Capitol. They were designed at an unfortunate period in our architectural history, when there was a tendency among architects to discard the classical motives which are so necessary to the effect of any work around the Capitol. The fountain on the west of the grounds [Plate 265] shows one of the most curious and objectionable combinations, both in form and detail.

The remarkable effectiveness of the lawns in connection with the planting and distant views is shown in Plate 266. The broad lawn on the west of the building [Plate 267], unbroken, with the stairway, terraces, and Capitol at its east end, is truly imposing. The broad paved plaza on the east of the Capitol [Plate 268] illustrates what pleasing and dignified effects may be produced by a proper proportion of simple lines with a judicious placing of architectural objects and the planting of fine trees. The drinking fountain on the west of the Senate wing [Plate 269] is a picturesque feature of the grounds when seen in connection with the beautiful group of trees, shrubs, and vines which surround it.⁷ The wisdom shown in the selection of Frederick Law Olmsted has been proved by the broad, imposing, as well as pleasing effects recognized by all who view the finished results. The dignity and effectiveness of the Capitol might so easily have been spoiled by a man of moderate capacity that it is a cause for congratulation that the one

⁷ This structure is known as the “Summer House” or “Grotto” today. RG 40, Subject Files, Curator’s Office, AOC.

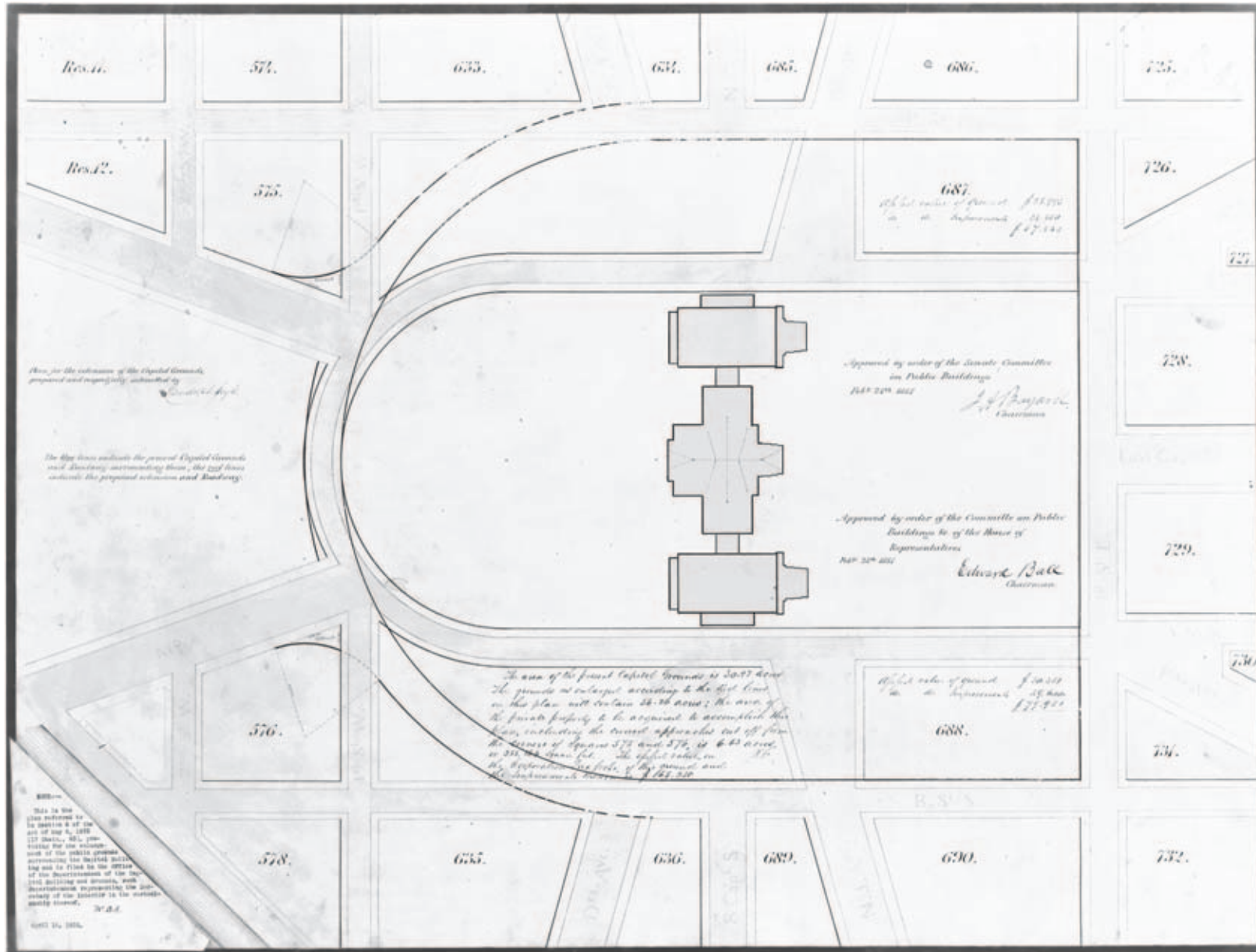
capable man, probably, in the country at that date was chosen for this important work. The selection of Thornton for the original design, Walter for the extension, and Olmsted for the final landscape work has produced most happy results. A comparison of the private work of these men with that done by their contemporaries in architecture and landscape gardening proves that they were the most capable men in

their professions at the time the selections were made. And, further, the sense of artistic effects, fitness, harmony, and refinement of detail on the Capitol will entitle them to a place at the head of their professions in the history of the country. The selection of artists who have proved their fitness in executed work is a precedent that may well be followed in future work of importance.



LANDSCAPE TREATMENT, BY T. U. WALTER, ARCHITECT.

Plan for the enlargement of the Capitol grounds, ca. 1864.

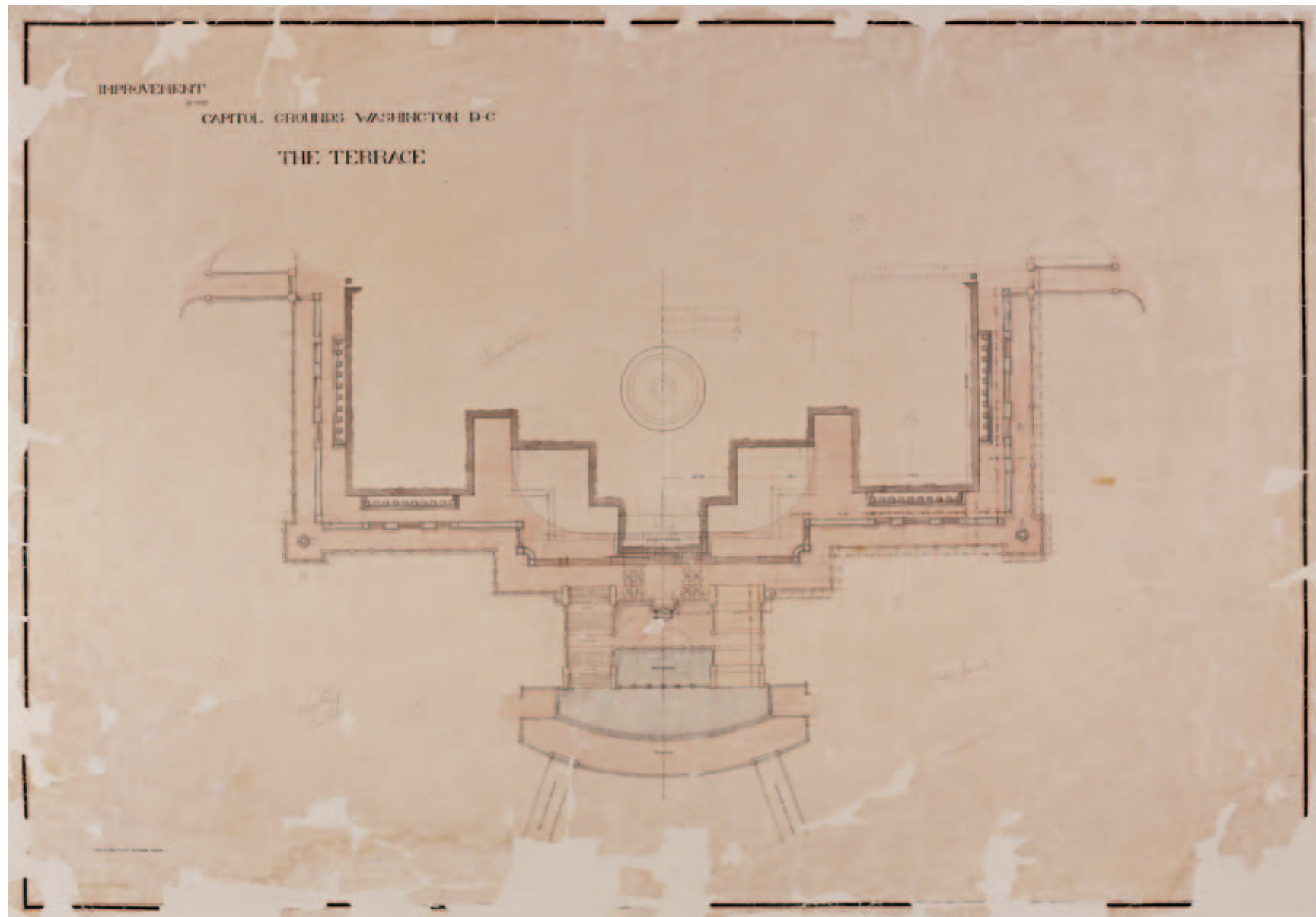


PLAT MADE FOR PURCHASE OF ADDITIONAL GROUND.

Dated February 24, 1857.

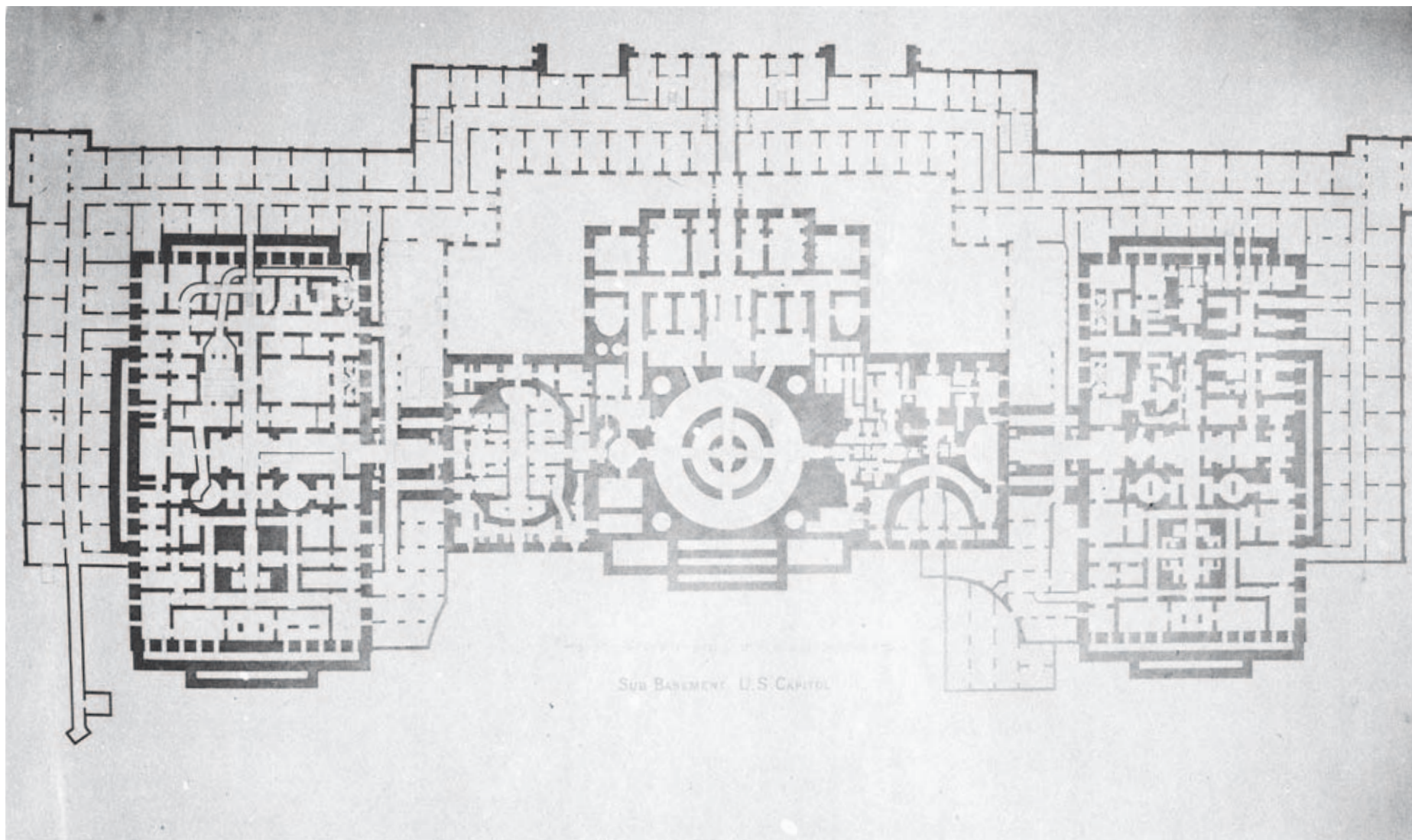


PLAN OF FREDERICK LAW OLMSTED, FOR TERRACES AND GROUNDS.
Terraces and naturalistic landscape design for the Capitol grounds, 1874.



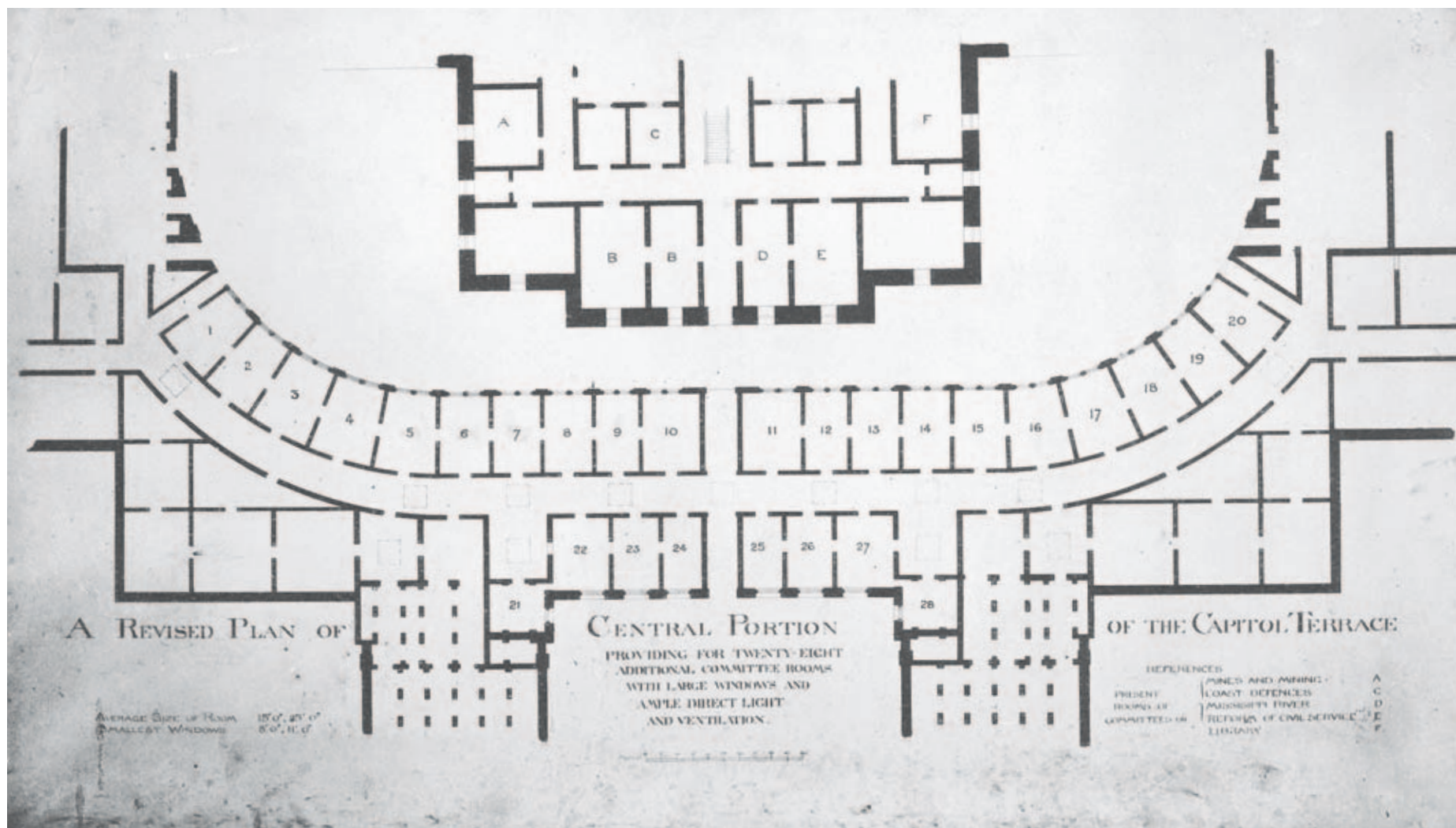
PLAN OF TERRACES AND WESTERN STAIRWAY,—F. L. OLMSTED, LANDSCAPE ARCHITECT.

Preliminary plan of the terraces and west stairway, 1874. The design of the area around the central staircase would be substantially revised in the mid-1880s.

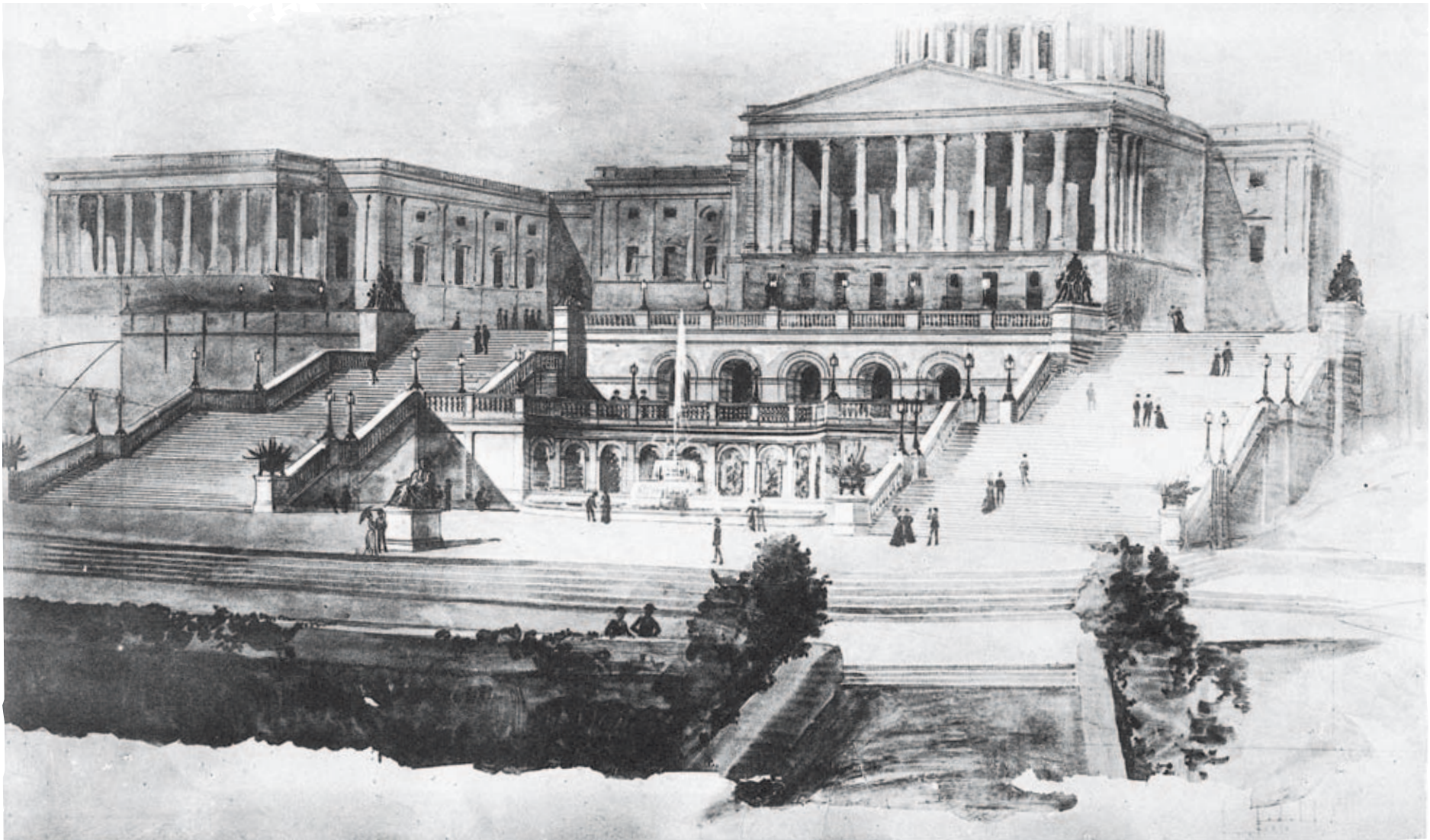


PLAN OF BASEMENT, SHOWING ROOMS BENEATH THE MARBLE TERRACE.

The plan as built ca. 1895. *Location unknown.*



REVISED PLAN OF ROOMS UNDER THE TERRACE.
 Proposal indicating the retention of parts of the Bullfinch Terrace, ca. 1886. Location unknown.



PERSPECTIVE OF EXTERIOR STAIRWAYS, FREDERICK LAW OLMSTED, LANDSCAPE ARCHITECT.

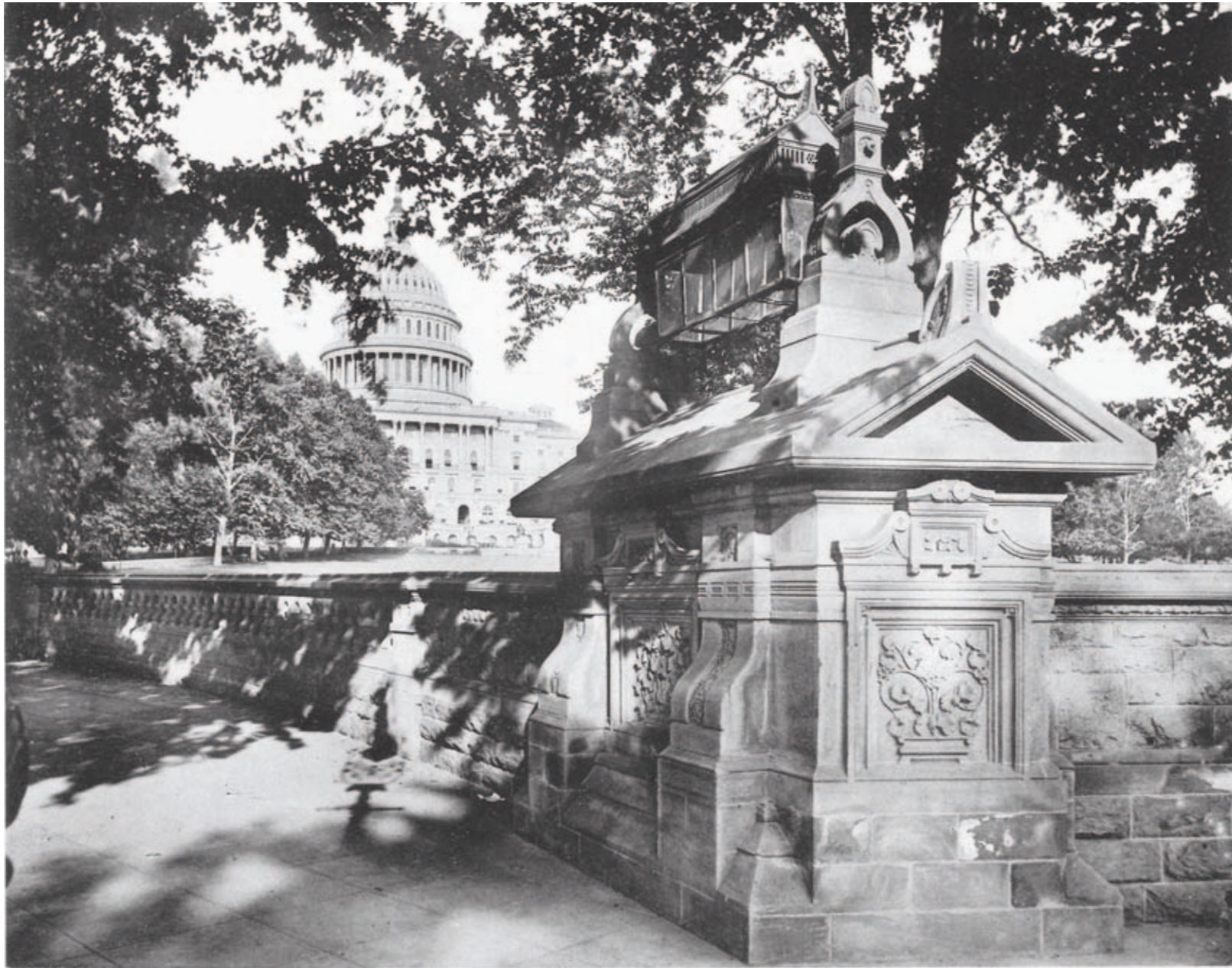
West terrace design before 1886.



NORTHWEST VIEW OF CAPITOL, SHOWING MARBLE TERRACE.



SOUTHWEST VIEW OF CAPITOL, SHOWING MARBLE TERRACE.



BALUSTRADE AND LANTERN,—F. L. OLMSTED, LANDSCAPE ARCHITECT.



LAMP POST AND PLANTING,—F. L. OLMSTED, LANDSCAPE ARCHITECT.



FOUNTAIN, EAST END OF GROUNDS.

Fountain located on the west end of the Capitol grounds. The drinking fountain, Summer House, and stone lamps reflect the ornate Victorian style of the architectural additions to Olmsted's naturalistic landscape design.



SOUTH LAWN AND TERRACE,—F. L. OLMSTED, LANDSCAPE ARCHITECT.



WESTERN LAWN,—F. L. OLMSTED, LANDSCAPE ARCHITECT.



PLAZA EAST OF CAPITOL,—F. L. OLMSTED, LANDSCAPE ARCHITECT.

With the exception of the removal of the statue of George Washington, the east plaza changed little throughout the twentieth century (related photograph, plate 118).



GROTTO AND GROVE ON WEST OF CAPITOL,—F. L. OLMSTED, LANDSCAPE ARCHITECT.

The Summer House is on the northwest grounds.



BRONZE TABLET ERECTED ON THE ONE HUNDREDTH ANNIVERSARY, OF LAYING THE CORNER STONE.

This plaque is located on the first floor of the Capitol near the entrance to the Old Supreme Court Chamber.