

The United States Capitol and Congress



The Capitol

The most recognized symbol of democratic government in the world, the United States Capitol has housed Congress since 1800. The Capitol is where Congress meets to write the laws of this nation, and where presidents are inaugurated and deliver their annual State of the Union messages. For nearly two centuries, the Capitol has grown along with the nation, adding new wings to accommodate the increasing number of senators and representatives as new states entered the Union. Its ceilings are decorated with historic images, and its halls are lined with statuary and paintings representing great events and people in the nation's history.

The Early Capitol

The original Capitol was designed by Dr. William Thornton, and the cornerstone was laid by President George Washington on September 18, 1793. Benjamin Henry Latrobe and Charles Bulfinch, among other architects, directed its early construction. In 1800, when the government moved from temporary quarters in Philadelphia to Washington, DC, the Capitol that awaited them was an unfinished brick and sandstone building. The Congress



Senator Henry Clay speaks on behalf of the Compromise of 1850 in the Old Senate Chamber.

moved into the small, cramped north wing. At first, the House met in a large room on the second floor intended for the Library of Congress; the Senate met in a chamber on the ground floor. Between 1810 and 1859, the Senate used a chamber on the second floor, now known as the Old Senate Chamber.



The Old Hall of the House of Representatives, as painted by Samuel F.B. Morse, in the collection of The Corcoran Gallery of Art.

In 1807, the south wing of the Capitol was completed for the House of Representatives. A wooden walkway across the vacant yard intended for the domed center building linked the House and Senate wings. This was how the Capitol appeared in August 1814, during America's second war with Great Britain, when British troops burned the Capitol and other public buildings in Washington. The exterior walls survived, but much of the interior was gutted. In 1819, the reconstructed wings of the Capitol were reopened. The center building, completed in 1826, joined the two wings. A low wood and copper dome covered the Rotunda.

Capitol Extensions and Dome

By 1850, so many new states had been admitted to the Union that the House and Senate had outgrown their chambers. It was decided to enlarge the Capitol by adding grand wings to the ends of the original building. In 1851, Daniel Webster, who had served in both houses of Congress, delivered one of

his famous orations at the laying of the cornerstone for the new wings. The House occupied its current chamber in 1857, and the Senate moved into its chamber in 1859.

The Old Hall of the House was later dedicated as National Statuary Hall. Congress invited each state to contribute two statues of its most notable citizens.

Today, these statues are displayed in Statuary Hall and in corridors throughout the building.

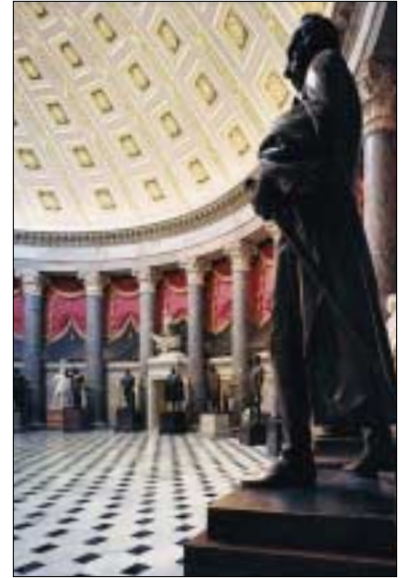
During the Civil War, work continued on the new cast-iron dome, designed by Thomas U. Walter. On December 2, 1863, the Statue of Freedom, by American artist Thomas Crawford, was placed at the top of the dome, 287 feet above the East Plaza.

In the 1870s, landscape architect Frederick Law Olmsted designed the terraces that run across the north, south, and west elevations of the Capitol. These terraces provided extra rooms as well as a grand pedestal for the building perched on the brow of Capitol Hill.

20th-Century Changes

By the opening of the twentieth century, the need for more space again became acute. The first House and Senate office buildings were finished in 1908 and 1909, respectively. Tunnels and electric subway cars connect these buildings with the Capitol.

Severe deterioration of the original sandstone walls prompted major renovations of the Capitol's exterior. Between 1958 and 1962 the East Front was extended thirty-two feet and the original facade replicated in marble. Portions of the old outside walls can still be viewed inside the East Front corri-



The Old Hall of the House now serves as National Statuary Hall.

dors. In the 1980s, the West Front was carefully repaired and restored; it is the only portion of the original exterior not covered by marble additions.

The Rotunda

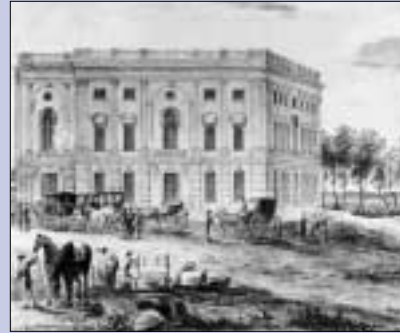
The Rotunda is the very heart of the Capitol. Although it serves no legislative function, it is a ceremonial center where state funerals have been held for presidents beginning with Abraham Lincoln, distinguished members of Congress, military heroes, and eminent citizens. Visiting heads of state have been received in the Rotunda, and memorable individuals and events celebrated.

Hanging in the Rotunda are four giant canvases painted by John Trumbull, an aide-de-camp to General Washington, who recorded scenes of the American Revolution. Four other artists added paintings depicting events associated with the discovery and settlement of the United States. On the canopy, suspended 180 feet above the Rotunda floor, the Italian-American artist Constantino Brumidi painted *The Apotheosis of Washington* inside the Capitol dome in 1865.



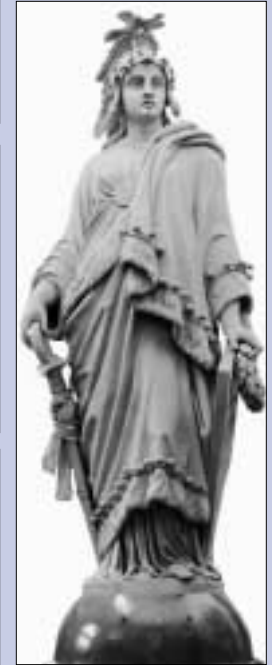
Brumidi painted *The Apotheosis of Washington*. It depicts George Washington surrounded by symbols of American democracy and technological progress. Brumidi painted and decorated many of the rooms and corridors of the Capitol, and he was painting the frieze that rings the Rotunda when he died. Other artists completed his work, which illustrates major events in the nation's history.

Help preserve the Capitol's art treasures for future generations. Please look at and enjoy, *but do not touch*, the paintings and sculptures.



A view of the Capitol in 1800 with only the north wing completed (left).

The first known photograph of the Capitol in 1846 (middle left).



The Statue of Freedom tops the dome (above).

Construction of the new cast-iron dome in 1861 (left).

Presidential Inaugurations have taken place at the Capitol since 1801. Seen here is Calvin Coolidge's Inauguration in 1925 (below).



The Congress

The chief focus of the Capitol is on the chambers of the Senate and House of Representatives. Here members introduce legislation; speak out on the issues; and cast votes on bills, resolutions, nominations, and treaties. A series of buzzers and lights throughout the Capitol and office buildings summon members to vote. The House chamber is in the south wing of the Capitol; the Senate chamber is in the north wing.

Galleries in both houses have been set aside for the print and broadcast media, and in recent years floor proceedings have been televised. Except on rare occasions, proceedings of the Senate and House and their committees are open to the press and public. News of congressional activities is broadcast instantly around the world from the Capitol, and visitors will often see cameras and reporters outside the building, using the Capitol dome as their backdrop.

The Senate

The Senate has 100 members, two from each state. A senator must be thirty years of age, a resident of the state, and a citizen of the United States for nine



The Senate chamber.

years. Senators are elected for six-year terms, one-third of the Senate being elected every two years.

Originally senators were chosen by state legislators, but in 1913 the Seventeenth Amendment provided for direct election of senators by the people. If a senator dies or leaves office in midterm, the governor of the state may appoint a replacement. The vice president is the presiding officer of the Senate, but on a daily basis the chair is usually held by the president pro tempore of the Senate (the senior member of the majority party) or a designee. The vice president votes only to break a tie.

The House of Representatives

The House of Representatives, under a law passed in 1911, is limited to 435 members. States are assigned a number of representatives based on their population and are redistricted every ten years after the census. Each state is entitled to at



The chamber of the House of Representatives.

least one representative. If a representative dies or leaves office in midterm, a special election is held to choose a replacement. In addition, non-voting delegates represent American Samoa, the District of Columbia, Guam, and the Virgin Islands; Puerto Rico is represented by a resident commissioner.

A representative must be twenty-five years of age, a resident of the state, and a citizen of the

United States for at least seven years. Members of the House of Representatives serve two-year terms. The presiding officer of the House is the Speaker. The Speaker is next in line after the vice president to succeed to the presidency.

Special Powers

Under the constitutional system of checks and balances, federal powers are both shared and divided among the legislative, executive, and judicial branches of government, as well as between the two houses of Congress. The Constitution gives both the Senate and House responsibility for declaring war, maintaining the armed forces, assessing taxes, borrowing money, minting currency, regulating commerce, and making all laws necessary for the operation of the government. The Senate alone offers advice and consent on treaties and nominations. The House of Representatives initiates all “money” bills (taxation and appropriation measures); the Senate may vote changes in such bills, and any differences are then resolved in conference between the House and Senate. The House votes on articles of impeachment (an indictment of the president or other federal officer), and the Senate judges whether or not to remove the individual from office.

Visitor Information

Visitors are encouraged to tour the Capitol, view its artwork and historic rooms, spend time in the galleries, and visit the offices of their senators and representatives. Congress is proud to maintain the Capitol as a building with few restrictions on visitors. The Capitol is open seven days a week, except Thanksgiving, Christmas, and New Year’s Day. For information on hours and tours call (202) 225-6827. When the Senate and House are in session, passes are necessary for admission to the chamber galleries. Visitors may obtain passes from their representative or senators. Foreign visitors may obtain House passes at the House appointment desk on the first floor and Senate passes at the Senate appointment desk, also on the first floor. Tours and assistance for persons with disabilities are available from the Congressional Special Services Office, in



The Rotunda is a highlight of a visit to the Capitol.

the first-floor central area known as the Crypt; for tour information call (202) 224-4048.

Materials providing additional information about the Capitol and the Congress are available at gift stands on the first floor. On the Internet information is available at the House and Senate websites: <http://www.house.gov> and <http://www.senate.gov>. Citizens of the United States who have specific questions about the Capitol or Congress are encouraged to write to either of their senators (Washington, DC 20510) or their representative (Washington, DC 20515).

Members’ Offices

Offices of representatives are located in the three buildings on the south side of the Capitol along Independence Avenue: the Cannon, Longworth, and Rayburn Buildings. Senators have offices in the three buildings on the north side of the Capitol along Constitution Avenue: the Russell, Dirksen, and Hart Buildings.