



## CHAPTER 11

# Brumidi's Last Works

The artist of the Capitol spent most of the last fifteen years of his life working on projects started or designed two decades before. He also continued to undertake outside church and private commissions (fig. 11-1). It is a common misconception, started in his obituaries and continued in later accounts, that he was “almost constantly at work upon the interior of the Capitol” for twenty-five years; in actuality, his employment was not continuous.<sup>1</sup> He worked most intensely during his first ten years at the Capitol, when he designed and began painting his most important rooms. He was on the payroll almost continuously from April 1855 through December 1861, with gaps as long as several months during which he worked on outside commissions, developed designs, or left town in the heat of the summer. As was common at the time, he worked six days a week, averaging twenty-six days of work and \$260 in pay a month.

His \$40,000 commission to paint the canopy in the Rotunda was thus a major exception to his normal income. During this project, however, delays in the construction of the dome forced him to survive long periods without payment. During all of 1862, even though he was working on designs for the canopy, Brumidi received

**Fig. 11-1. Drawing room of Justin Morrill's house.** Around 1873 Brumidi painted the portraits of famous authors mounted in the ceiling in the house formerly at One Thomas Circle, Washington, D.C. Photo: The Vermont Division for Historic Preservation.



**Fig. 11-2. Brumidi at the end of his life.** This print, based on a photograph, shows Brumidi with white hair and beard. Plate by C.M. Bell. Architect of the Capitol.

no pay for any work in the Capitol. The next year he received five \$2,000 payments for preparing full-size cartoons for the fresco, and in 1864 he was paid a total of \$6,000. He painted *The Apotheosis of Washington* in 1865, but was paid for only half the year. He was paid for the second half in April 1866 and finally received the balance of \$9,500 in June.

Once the canopy was finished, there was a long gap before Brumidi resumed working at the Capitol.

Discouraged at not being allowed to complete several rooms in the Senate, he traveled to Cuba at the end of 1866, returning to Washington in May 1867 to work on the Senate Post Office (S-211). By this time, construction of the extensions and new dome was completed, and unfinished decorative work came to a halt. No payments to Brumidi are recorded in 1868. He resumed work on the Senate Reception Room in 1869 and 1870 and continued to paint in the Capitol for most of 1871. In 1873, after another hiatus, in which he was most likely working in New York, he returned to the Capitol and began sporadically adding frescoed lunettes and portraits. For all of these projects, he was paid by the individual fresco rather than by the day. Finally, in March 1877, he began preparing the cartoons for the frieze; he continued work on this project until his death in February 1880, working at the same rate of \$10 per day he had earned twenty years earlier.<sup>2</sup>

By this time, his hair and beard were white (fig. 11-2). He stayed remarkably active despite his age and the health problems that plagued him. Rheumatic attacks and



**Fig. 11–3. Crucifixion in St. Stephen’s Church, as it looked c. 1948.** *Brumidi’s complex composition includes God the Father and the dove of the Holy Spirit above the central figure. At either side of the cross stand Mary and John, while Mary Magdalene weeps at its foot. In the right corner, soldiers throw dice for Christ’s cloak.*

Photo: Courtesy of John Segreto.

asthma affected his mobility; they were perhaps also a factor in an apparent decline in the fluidity of composition and gracefulness of detail in some of his late work, such as *Signing of the First Treaty of Peace* and *John Fitch*. However, any impression of declining quality may equally well be due to later damage from leaks and changes made by restorers. Despite his infirmities, he was still described as “cordial, charming, enthusiastic to all with whom he was in sympathy.”<sup>3</sup>

### American Church Commissions

The major cathedrals and churches in which Brumidi painted murals are testimony to his stature as an artist. His work had been noticed by Archbishop John Hughes in Rome, and he had emigrated to the United States at a

time when the growing Catholic Church was erecting buildings in many cities. His ecclesiastical commissions continued to parallel his work at the Capitol. Only once did someone mistakenly complain about his painting pictures for churches while he was being paid by the government.<sup>4</sup> Brumidi painted in oil on canvas for the Jesuit Church of St. Ignatius in Baltimore so that he would not have to leave Washington; his *Mystical Vision of St. Ignatius at La Storta* was dedicated in late 1856.<sup>5</sup> Another important Jesuit commission, for which Father Benedict Sestini recommended Brumidi, was the altarpiece for the Church of St. Aloysius on North Capitol Street, only blocks from the Capitol. *St. Charles Borromeo Giving Holy Communion to St. Aloysius Gonzaga* (see fig. 5–5) was in place for the 1859 dedication of the church, at which Archbishop Hughes spoke. Although based on a print of a seventeenth-century painting, Brumidi’s composition is

more complex, and he included contemporary portraits to represent historical figures.<sup>6</sup>

Archbishop Hughes also spoke at the dedication of the Roman Baroque-style Cathedral of SS. Peter and Paul in Philadelphia, the largest cathedral in North America at the time. Brumidi painted the *Crucifixion* in fresco (see fig. 1–19); above it was a lunette with God the Father and the dove of the Holy Spirit, and on either side were illusionistic statues of saints. These frescoes were in place by August 1863, as were the *Assumption of the Virgin* in the dome and the tondos of the four evangelists in the pendentives, which Brumidi had painted in oil on canvas in Washington; by this time Brumidi had been paid \$2,000.<sup>7</sup> By the time the cathedral was dedicated in 1864, he had added two large frescoes showing the Adoration of the Shepherds and the Adoration of the Magi, flanked by illusionistic statues in niches of the twelve apostles. A contemporary writer admiringly described the effect Brumidi had achieved: “They seem like niches, but they are not; and in each seems to stand a statue, but it does not. The observer is almost sure that before him stands a niche, enclosing a statue. The perspective is wonderful.”<sup>8</sup> Although in 1863 the ability of Brumidi’s frescoes to last 500 years had been touted, unfortunately, little remains visible of Brumidi’s work. The central frescoes were destroyed when the apse was enlarged in 1956–1957, and the nativity scenes have been covered over and repainted several times.<sup>9</sup>

Brumidi’s work at the Church of St. Stephen on 28th Street in New York City, like the that in Capitol Rotunda, was a crowning achievement of his late years. He was selected by Archbishop John Hughes for work at St. Stephen’s before he left Rome, as he mentioned in his trial testimony in 1851.<sup>10</sup> Designed by James Renwick in 1850 in a modified Romanesque/Gothic style, the church was dedicated in 1854. By 1855, Brumidi showed the color sketch for the *Martyrdom of St. Stephen* to Meigs, who commented: “This cartoon is about ½ size of life and is a striking and vigorous work.”<sup>11</sup> The fifteen-foot high *Martyrdom*, showing the saint surrounded by contorted men stoning him, completed in 1856, served for many years as the central altarpiece for the church, now renamed Our Lady of the Scapular and St. Stephen. Brumidi may have painted the murals at the entrance of the church in this period; they include figures of King David and Saint Cecilia and a Madonna and Child with John the Baptist in illusionistic niches. After the church was enlarged, between 1861 and 1865, the *Martyrdom* was moved to one side, and Brumidi painted the monumental 70-foot-high *Crucifixion* on the altar wall; he signed and dated the work “C. Brumidi 1868” (fig. 11–3).<sup>12</sup> Brumidi is known to have been in New York in 1870, and he wrote that he was working at St. Stephen’s in 1871.<sup>13</sup> Brumidi probably designed the church’s inte-

rior decorative program, filled with illusionistic patterns and moldings. He balanced the *Martyrdom* with an oil-on-canvas *Assumption of the Virgin*. He filled the apse walls and transept balconies with illusionistic statues of saints in niches, tondos and lunettes, and trompe l’oeil architectural elements (see Appendix C). The illusionistic scalloped rounded niches echo the frames of the paintings and the tracery of the stained glass windows. Attention is now being turned to restoring the badly damaged murals and the decorative whole.<sup>14</sup>

Brumidi’s last known religious commissions are the *Crucifixion* he painted for the Academy of Mount Saint Vincent in Riverdale, New York, in 1873 and *The Apparition of Our Lord to St. Margaret Mary* for the Visitation Convent in Washington, D.C., in 1878. Thus it is clear that his career as a painter for churches was concurrent with that as the artist of the Capitol.

## Completing the Senate Designs

Over the years, because he was working primarily on the Senate side of the Capitol, Brumidi earned the friendship and respect of many senators and Senate officials. Representative and then Senator Justin Morrill, first elected in 1855 and later chairman of the Committee on Public Buildings and Grounds, was a personal friend. Brumidi painted Morrill’s portrait and also executed four oval portraits of famous authors for the drawing room ceiling of Morrill’s house on Thomas Circle (see fig. 11–1); fortunately, they were saved when the house, built by Edward Clark, was demolished. The senator obtained books for the artist and visited him when he was hospitalized on Thanksgiving Day in 1874.<sup>15</sup> Senator Arthur P. Gorman owned one of Brumidi’s sketches for the Senate Reception Room. Brumidi’s friendship with Moses Titcomb, who was the superintendent of the Senate Document Room from 1844 to 1877, is shown by the portraits he painted of Titcomb and his father and his gift of his own copy of Guido Reni’s *Aurora* (see fig. 1–11). Titcomb also owned Brumidi’s copy of Rembrandt Peale’s *George Washington*, which is possibly the study made for the President’s Room (S–216). In return, Titcomb lent him money and expressed concern for Brumidi’s poor health.<sup>16</sup> Brumidi gave Amzi Smith of the Senate Document Room his oil sketch of the *Crucifixion* for St. Stephen’s Church, and he used Smith’s hand as the model for Thomas Jefferson’s in the Senate Reception Room.<sup>17</sup> Isaac Basset, a doorkeeper of the Senate, wrote: “I was very fond of the old gentleman and he of *Me* — often I went into the *rooms* when he was at work and Spent many a pleasen [*sic*] Moment in Seeing him Frescoe. . . .”<sup>18</sup>



**Fig. 11-4. Two of four portrait medallions in former Senate Foreign Relations Committee Room.** *Brumidi added illusionistic relief portraits of committee chairmen to the ceiling begun by Carstens many years before. Shown here are Charles Sumner and Henry Clay. S-118.*

At the Capitol, Brumidi worked on unfinished murals in the major rooms described in chapter 8, including the ceiling of the Senate Post Office (S-211), three lunettes for the Senate Committee on Military Affairs room (S-128), and murals in the Senate Reception Room (S-213). Each year he added frescoed lunettes in the first-floor Senate corridors, as described in detail in chapter 6.

*Robert Fulton* was painted in 1873; *Signing of the First Treaty with Great Britain* in 1874; *Cession of Louisiana, Bellona, Columbus and the Indian Maiden*, and *Authority Consults the Written Law* all probably in 1875; *Bartholomé de Las Casas* in 1876; and the portraits of Story, Kent, and Livingston in the north entry in 1878.

Simultaneously, he contributed frescoes to several committee rooms and offices in which decorative work had been started years earlier. For example, in 1874 he finished portrait medallions for the Senate Committee on Foreign Relations room (S-118), now occupied by the Democratic Policy Committee (fig. 11-4). Although the decoration of the room, including the illusionistic brocade panels on the walls and the eagles in tempera in the lunettes, was carried out by Emmerich Carstens in 1856, almost twenty years passed before Brumidi filled the spaces left in the ceiling for frescoes. The portraits of the four committee chairmen, Henry Clay, William Allen, Simon Cameron, and Charles Sumner, are in grisaille, to appear as classical stone relief busts in circular medallions.<sup>19</sup>

## S-129

In 1875, Brumidi frescoed his last groin-vaulted ceiling in the Capitol for the Committee on the Library (S-129) (fig. 11-5). Befitting the nature of the committee, the subjects were science, sculpture, architecture, and painting, represented by Brumidi's typical Madonna-like female figures painted as if seen from below.<sup>20</sup>

Science spreads her wings, her right hand touching a blue celestial globe encircled with signs of the zodiac, her left to her chin in thought. She is flanked by a printing press and a telescope. Sculpture, holding a chisel and mallet, watches a cherub inscribing the name of the American writer Washington Irving on the pedestal of the bust she has carved. Architecture holds wooden tools and a drawing of the Capitol dome, while a cherub shows a floor plan of the Capitol. Painting holds a palette and brushes, with one cherub lifting the lid of her paint box and the other holding her oil-on-canvas portrait of the historian William H. Prescott.<sup>21</sup> The highly decorative borders were executed in tempera.

Many years later, in 1910, when the room was used by the Senate Military Affairs Committee, the lunettes were completed by Carl Rakemann, son of Brumidi's assistant Joseph. He added the oval portraits of Revolutionary generals George Washington, Joseph Warren, Anthony Wayne, and Horatio Gates, painted in oil on canvas. In the corners of the ornately painted ceiling are female heads over cartouches; their crudely overpainted faces are the work of an inferior restorer in the 1960s.<sup>22</sup>



**Fig. 11-5. Ceiling designed for the Senate Committee on the Library.** *Brumidi painted the vaults with figures representing the arts and sciences. Faces over the shields have been repainted. S-129.*

## S-212

In 1876, Brumidi completed the small but impressively decorated room off the Senate Reception Room, originally created for the Senate sergeant at arms and now used by the office of the vice president. The Civil War theme of the decorations makes the room one of the few places where Brumidi alluded to a contemporary political event, albeit in allegorical terms (fig. 11-6).

In 1862, during the war, Brumidi first submitted an estimate of \$2,000 for a large historical painting.<sup>23</sup> The next year, he spent a month decorating the room of the

Senate sergeant at arms; he apparently painted the illusionistic reliefs at this time, with the expectation that the Union would survive and peace would return.<sup>24</sup> In 1866, when the chairman of the Senate Committee on Public Buildings and Grounds urged that the decoration of the room be finished during the recess of Congress, Brumidi submitted a new estimate for the large painting of \$3,000, which Architect of the Capitol Edward Clark judged “unreasonably high.”<sup>25</sup> Brumidi painted an oil sketch of the scene; he would later follow it faithfully when he was finally allowed to execute the fresco in 1876, after his petition to Senator L. M. Mor-



Fig. 11–6. *Columbia Welcoming the South Back into the Union*. The woman representing America is accompanied by others symbolizing the North, while the South is led by Liberty. S–212.

rill, Chairman of the Senate Committee on Appropriations, was granted.<sup>26</sup>

*Columbia Welcoming the South Back into the Union* is signed and dated “BRUMIDI 1876.” Here the artist sublimated the devastation of the Civil War into a vision of smiling classical figures harmoniously grouped in a picturesque landscape. Columbia, dressed in a tunic and sandals and holding what appears to be a rudder, is grouped with two other female figures, one with a sheaf of wheat and plate of fruit symbolizing agriculture in the northern states and the other holding a caduceus, symbol of commerce. Columbia extends a hand to the South, who is dressed humbly in a toga with long flowing hair and one breast bared. She holds a bouquet of fluffy cotton bolls. She is being led by Liberty, who wears a liberty cap and has a band of stars across her chest, and is accompanied by an eagle holding the olive branch of peace in its beak. The composition seems to have been influenced by a painting by Luther Terry, an American artist living in Rome: *An Allegory of the North and South*, painted in 1858, and perhaps known to Brumidi through an engraving, includes three figures, one representing America with the others symbolizing the South and the North, dressed much like Brumidi’s.<sup>27</sup>

The rectangular panel in the barrel-vaulted ceiling is surrounded by an illusionistic carved frame, as if it were an oil

painting fixed to the ceiling. In this case, Brumidi did not show the figures as if seen from below. Below the fresco is a border meant to look like a carved stone relief, supporting shields and cupids intertwined with rinceaux of leaves and flowers. The iconography of the small rectangular imitation low reliefs was described in an early guidebook:

On the walls are four allegorical designs in *basso relievo*: that on the E. representing Dissolution or Secession, illustrated in the breaking of the fasces or bundle of rods, while on the one side lies cotton and on the other corn, the rival products of the opposing sections of the country. On the S. is the same figure as War, with the engines of strife. On the W. the bundle of rods are again united, with the motto *E Pluribus Unum* and an eagle. On the N. the implements of war are being destroyed and exchanged for those of peace.<sup>28</sup>

The room was occupied by the Senate sergeant at arms until 1946 and has been assigned to the vice president since 1961.<sup>29</sup> The illusionistic reliefs have been heavily and darkly overpainted, probably more than once. The fresco is known to have been retouched by Charles Moberly in 1918.<sup>30</sup> Conservation treatment is expected to make the delicate colors of the fresco much more apparent.



**Fig. 11-7. Scroll of frieze sketches being presented by Myrtle Cheney Murdock in 1961.** *The scroll was later divided into individual scenes for conservation. Holding the scroll are, from left to right, Architect of the Capitol J. George Stewart, Mildred Thompson, John R. Murdock, and Mrs. Murdock.*

## The Rotunda Frieze

Brumidi spent the end of his life working on the frieze that encircles the base of the dome, fifty-eight feet above the Rotunda floor. Architect Thomas Walter had envisioned the frieze as a carved stone relief. However, Thomas Crawford's estimate of \$50,000 to sculpt a frieze of classical figures in marble was judged too high. After Crawford's death in 1857, other options were considered, including having a frieze cast in zinc. The idea of the frieze of historical events evidently captured Brumidi's imagination at the time Walter was designing the dome, for his 30-foot-long scroll of sketches for it is dated 1859 (fig. 11-7).<sup>31</sup> On the sketches, Brumidi noted the title and planned dimensions of each scene.

As detailed in chapter 10, the ideas for the scenes originated with Emanuel Leutze and Montgomery Meigs, who first envisioned the frieze as "the pre-Columbian and post-Columbian history of the continent." The pre-Columbian section was later dropped. The subjects were derived from contemporary histories of the country by George Bancroft and Francis Parkman, which emphasized early Spanish explorers and the American Revolution. For example, the buffalo skin painted with an eagle in the scene of Oglethorpe and the Muskogee Indians fits the description in Bancroft's *History of the Colonization of the*

*United States*.<sup>32</sup> In addition, Brumidi would have known William H. Prescott's *History of the Conquest of Mexico* and *History of the Conquest of Peru*, published in the 1840s. Congress debated expanding the country into Cuba and Central America, and political leaders such as Meigs's ally Jefferson Davis dreamed of extending farther into Mexico. This conception of "Caribbeanized Manifest Destiny" may be reflected in the inclusion of South American explorers in the frieze.<sup>33</sup>

Brumidi submitted his 1859 proposal for the frieze only days after the canopy was unveiled, but he was not allowed to begin work on it until 1877.<sup>34</sup> Rather than a specific authorization or appropriation by Congress, there was a verbal agreement between Edward Clark and the Joint Committee on the Library to allow the artist to work for his usual \$10 a day.<sup>35</sup> Brumidi began preparing the cartoons for the first scenes; he was paid at a daily rate beginning in March 1877.<sup>36</sup> Clark reported on October 1: "The belt of the rotunda intended to be enriched with basso relievos is being embellished in real fresco representing events in our history, arranged in chronological order, beginning with the landing of Columbus. . . ." <sup>37</sup> Brumidi did not begin painting on the wall until the spring of the next year.

The artist made the half-size studies and full-size working drawings in his home studio, with a space the height





**Fig. 11-8.** Sketch for “America and History” and “Landing of Columbus.” *Brumidi’s small sketch was painted in black and white to give the sense of light and shadow in low relief. Architect of the Capitol.*

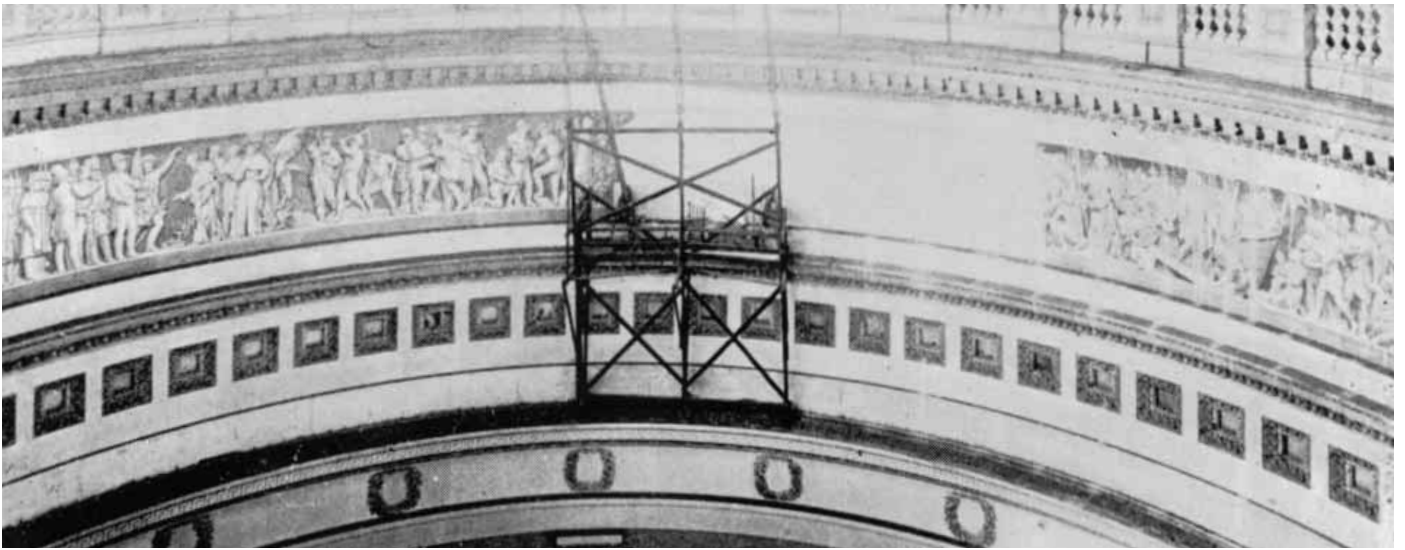
of the frieze marked off on his wall.<sup>38</sup> Once on the scaffold, Brumidi began painting, over the east door, a male figure bending to the left; this was to be the end figure in the last scene, “Discovery of Gold in California.” The figure touches the first grouping of allegorical figures, “America and History” (see fig. 11-8 and frieze foldout at the end of this chapter).<sup>39</sup> America, wearing a liberty cap, carries a spear and shield; the Indian maiden symbolizing the untamed American continent did not appear in Brumidi’s sketch. With them are an American eagle and a female figure crowned with laurel leaves representing history with a stone tablet.

In Brumidi’s sketch and in the frieze itself, the scenes are visually divided from one another by trees or other vertical supports. He once pointed out: “You notice between the groups is always something interposed—a tree, a column—something which shall keep the groups distinct.”<sup>40</sup> As painted, the story proceeds with the Spanish explorers, from “Landing of Columbus” through “Cortez and Montezuma at Mexican Temple,” “Pizarro Going to Peru,” and “Burial of DeSoto.” The English arrive and establish themselves in the New World with “Captain Smith and Pocahontas,” “Landing of the Pilgrims,” “William Penn and the Indians,” “Colonization of New England,” and “Oglethorpe and the Indians.” The Revolutionary War is summarized by “Battle of Lexington,” “Declaration of Independence,” and “Surrender of Cornwallis.” The War of 1812 is represented by “Death of Tecumseh” and the Mexican War by “American Army Entering the City of Mexico.” Brumidi intended the frieze to end with “A Laborer in the Employ of Captain Sutter,” alternatively titled “Discovery of Gold

in California.” He explained that his intention was to show that “the discovery of that new Pacific empire completed a cycle of National history.”<sup>41</sup> As discussed further in chapter 12, after Brumidi’s death in 1880, his unexecuted designs were enlarged and completed by Filippo Costaggini between 1881 and 1889, but a thirty-one-foot gap remained between the last and first scenes. In 1953, after many decades of debate, the frieze was finally completed by Allyn Cox with “Peace at the End of the Civil War,” “Naval Gun Crew in the Spanish-American War,” and “The Birth of Aviation.”<sup>42</sup>

Brumidi painted the frieze in grisaille, a monochrome of whites and browns that creates the effect of sculptured relief. The frieze measures 8 feet 4 inches in height, including a 7-inch plain brown band hidden by the ledge below it, and is approximately 300 feet in circumference. Brumidi was extremely successful in creating the illusion of three-dimensional stone forms in light and shade; visitors to the Rotunda are often fooled into thinking they are looking at actual sculpture.

When he began painting the frieze Brumidi was seventy-two years old; debilitated by asthma, chronic diarrhea, and other ailments; and working under extremely difficult conditions. After ascending a long flight of stairs, the white-haired artist had to climb over the balcony under the windows and descend a long ladder to the small scaffold dangling almost sixty feet above the Rotunda floor (fig. 11-9). Some comfort was provided by a chair placed on the scaffold.<sup>43</sup> A friend petitioning that an elevator be installed for him offered a graphic description of the situation:



**Fig. 11–9. Scaffold used to paint the frieze.** *Brumidi's precarious scaffold was left hanging in the Rotunda for many years.*  
From George Hazleton, *The National Capitol*, 1897.

. . . this wonderful old man has daily to climb up to an elevation of fully eighty feet, enter a window & then descend a ladder at least twenty five feet long to the little pent up crib where he toils. He is so aged and feeble that he requires help to reach the place, & you can easily imagine the fatigue attendant upon the mere labor of getting to and away from his work. Besides in stormy wet tempestuous weather he cannot get there at all. . . .<sup>44</sup>

At the end, he was hoisted up to the scaffold “seated in a little box or cage that was elevated by a rope passing through a pulley aloft in the dome,” watched by crowds of people below.<sup>45</sup> To check the effect of his work, he would climb up the ladder and walk around to the other side of the balcony. A laborer, E. A. Martin, was assigned to help him, and Brumidi’s obituary indicates that his son Laurence, then a teenager, also provided some assistance.

His work was interrupted by illness, including a hospitalization in October 1878, and by winter weather so cold that frost formed on the mortar.<sup>46</sup> In the summer of 1879, he had to leave the city because of his asthma, and he worked on the cartoons in the resort at Orkney Springs, Virginia. In September, when he asked to be reinstated on the payroll, Brumidi wrote to Clark that he was “much worried by the terrible future prospect of starvation as soon as my bad health prevent me to do the daily work, having Safe [*sic*] nothing in the past, when the fortune provided me with very profittable [*sic*] works. . . .”<sup>47</sup>

The old man worked slowly, painting half a figure a day. By April 1878, the first scene was completed. By the fall, he was working on the cartoon for the scene of Poca-

hontas. In October, the mortaring was begun for the scene of de Soto. During the cold weather, he worked on *Landing of the Pilgrims*. In March 1879, he researched details for *American Army Entering the City of Mexico*, consulting General Scott’s widow and a history of the Mexican War by Mansfield.<sup>48</sup>

In April, he was interviewed by a reporter for the *Washington Post*, who wrote: “Probably nothing under the Capitol dome attracts so much attention and comment as the procession of figures, which has now traveled one-quarter of the way around the circle, just under the upper gallery, and pauses at the scaffold, hanging, like Mohammed’s coffin, midway between the heaven and the earth, where the artist, Brumidi, is at work. . . . The probability is that nobody has ever seen him working. When he is carried up to the scaffold he sits down in a chair, and remains seated, working incessantly until it is time for him to be swung down again.” Brumidi spoke of the importance of his drawings: “I must be so close to my work—I can get no distance. I should lose all proportion if I trusted to my eyes.” He estimated then that it would take five years for him to finish the frieze.<sup>49</sup>

In July 1879, he went back and retouched the cartoon for the scene showing Pizarro; at the same time, he was working on the one of William Penn and had begun sketching on the wall *Colonization of New England*. In September he began painting the eighth scene, *William Penn and the Indians*, showing the famous peace treaty in Pennsylvania.

On October 1, halfway through frescoing this scene, Brumidi nearly fell from the scaffold. His own account of the accident, told in the third person, is graphic:

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. . . while sitting upon a temporary scaffold, and near its edge the chair turned from under him and threw him over; he caught the round of a ladder and, remained suspended by the strength of his arms for the space of fifteen minutes, till officer Lammon(s) descended from the top of the Dome to the scaffold and called two men from the floor of the Rotunda to assist in the rescue of your petitioner.<sup>50</sup>

The oft-told stories that Brumidi fell from the scaffold and died or that he never worked again are both untrue. In fact, he worked on the scaffold at least once again. One reporter wrote: “It is the general impression that Mr. Brumidi never recovered from the shock occasioned by his fall last summer, when he narrowly escaped a fall to the floor below, but those who are most familiar with his work at the Capitol do not attribute it to that, as he returned on the following day, and worked with unusual rapidity and energy, accomplishing more than in any other day for a long time before. That was his last full day’s work, however. The approach of cold weather, to which he was always sensitive, and increasing ill health combined to confine him to the house.” Another article states that he “was forced to suspend after working a short time because of nervousness. He doubts that he will be able to finish the work on which he is engaged though he thinks he can complete the cartoons on paper, so that others can transfer them to the walls.”<sup>51</sup>

Before his death in February, Brumidi had begun sketching “Colonization of New England” and completed the cartoons up to “Battle of Lexington.”<sup>52</sup> An obituary gave a poignant description of his last months:

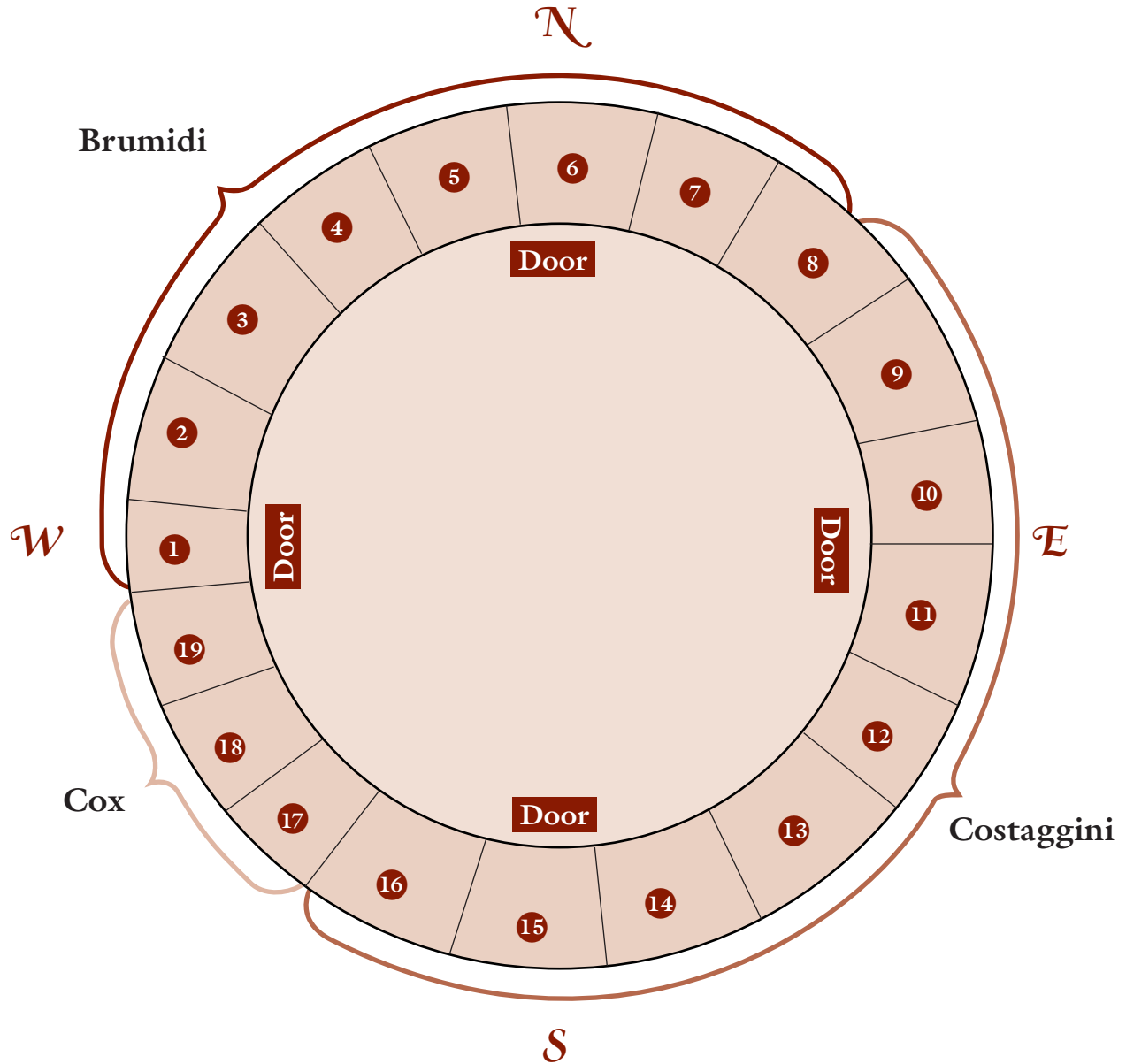
Almost until the last hour he continued his work on the frescoes in the dome of the Capitol, though compelled to sit instead of standing, his hand and eye were as true and strong as ever, and the work from that point on shows no loss in spirit or excellence of execution. For months the little scaffold that clings to the wall in mid air under the dome of the Capitol has been deserted, and curious strangers, looking at the neglected cartoons hanging over the railings have been told that Brumidi would never come back to finish his frescoes. It was the dream of his life that he should come back. He wanted with his own hand to lead that historic procession round the dome till the encircling frieze should be complete.<sup>53</sup>

Brumidi did literally work on the frieze until the end of his life; he was paid for thirteen days of work in February, and he was working on the cartoon for “Battle of Lexington” the day before he died on the morning of the 19th.

1. “Death of Brumidi, the Fresco-Painter of the National Capitol,” *Evening Telegraph* (Philadelphia), February 19, 1880, p. 2.
2. Brumidi’s son Laurence claimed that only one quarter of his father’s annual income came from the government, see Laurence Brumidi, “History of the Frieze in the Rotunda of the Capitol, Washington, D.C.,” undated manuscript, c. 1915. AOC/CO. It is possible that this was true toward the end of Brumidi’s life.
3. “The Paintings and the Painter of the Capitol Rotunda,” *Boston Evening Transcript*, March 4, 1880, p. 6.
4. Anonymous letter to TUV, April 8, 1857. AOC/CO.
5. CB to Rev. Benedict Sestini (in Italian), November 11, 1855; Rev. Sestini to an unnamed priest, November 20, 1856. Georgetown University Archives, Washington, D.C., Catholic Historical Manuscripts Collection.
6. A print of the same subject by Cavaliere Francesco Cairo in Milan published in *Acta Sanctorum*, Antwerp, June 1707, was discovered by Father George Anderson, S.J.
7. *A Cathedral Is Built*, Philadelphia: American Catholic Historical Society, 1964, pp. 17–19.
8. “The Great Roman Catholic Cathedral in Philadelphia,” *Constitutional Union* (Washington), November 17, 1864, p. 1.
9. Because of water damage, in 1889 Filippo Costaggini covered the nativity scenes with canvas and repainted the scenes; Louis Costaggini also “restored” them in 1909, according to his letter to the Joint Committee on the Library, dated January 27, 1909. AOC/CO. The scenes have again been overpainted in recent years.
10. CB to Card. Giacomo Antonelli, October 19, 1851, ASR/SC.
11. MCMJ, January 30, 1855, A–410.
12. Alfred Isaacson, *The Determined Doctor: The Story of Edward McGlynn* (Tarrytown, New York: Vestigium Press, n.d.).
13. CB at 331 4th Avenue, New York City, to Edward Clark, April 22, 1871. AOC/CO.
14. Claudia McDonnell, “Hidden Treasure,” *Catholic New York*, July 17, 1977, pp. 16–17.
15. The portraits of Dickens, Hawthorne, Longfellow, and Prescott are preserved in the Morrill Memorial, Strafford, Vermont, The Vermont Division for Historic Preservation. Morrill’s portrait by Brumidi is in the Justin Morrill Memorial Library Collection, Strafford, Vermont, per Gwenda Smith. EC to Justin Morrill, August 5, 1873, AOC/LB. CB to EC, November 30, 1874, AOC/CO.
16. The portrait of Moses Titcomb is at the William A. Farnsworth Library and Art Museum, Rockland, Maine. Brumidi’s portrait of the Rev. Benjamin Titcomb, after Badger, is in the Portland (Maine) Public Library, see Gilbert Merrill Titcomb, *Descendants of William Titcomb* (Ann Arbor, Michigan: Lithographed by Edwards Brothers, 1969), p. 83. TUV to CB, September 5, 1865, TUV/PA (AAA reel 4242); Moses Titcomb to EC, January 10, 1879, AOC/CO. The Peale copy is mentioned in a letter from Henry Wadsworth Longfellow to Alex Longfellow, January 25, 1879, Houghton Library, Harvard University, Cambridge, Massachusetts.
17. Myrtle Cheney Murdock, *Constantino Brumidi: Michelangelo of the United States Capitol* (Washington, D.C.: Monumental Press, Inc., 1950), p. 96. Smith was one of the artist’s pallbearers. “Brumidi’s Funeral,” *The Evening Star* (Washington), February 21, 1880.
18. Isaac Bassett Papers, USSC, file 10A, 21–22.

19. "The room of the Committee on Foreign Relations has been completed, with the exception of four spaces reserved for fresco paintings." *Annual report of Capt. M.C. Meigs, in charge of Capitol Extension*, 34th Cong., 3d sess., November 1856, Sen. Ex. Doc 5. Carstens was paid for "one ornamental" on October 16, 1874, and was mentioned in DeB. Randolph Keim, *Keim's Capitol Interior and Diagrams* (Washington, D.C.: n.p., 1874), p. 55. Brumidi provided an estimate for the medallions on November 2, 1872, and was paid for the work on June 20 and November 11, 1877. However, a letter to Senator Simon Cameron from Edward Clark, September 7, 1875, mentions Brumidi as being at work in "your committee room." At the time, the Senator was on the Committee on Foreign Relations.
20. 1875, AOC/AR.
21. The oil sketch for the scene including the historian's name is at the Morrill Homestead, Strafford, Vermont.
22. Will P. Kennedy, "Moberly Restoring Brumidi Decorations at the Capitol," *Sunday Star*, August 14, 1921, pp. 1–2. A 1959 photograph shows the faces before they were crudely overpainted, AOC.
23. October 10, 1862, TUV/PA (AAA, roll 4149).
24. Brumidi was paid \$249.51 for 26 days at \$10 per day, minus income tax, AOC/EXT.
25. B. Gratz Brown to the secretary of the interior, July 17, 1866, NARA, RG 48, series 291, box 2. CB to EC, July 20, 1866, NARA/RG 48, series 290, box 2; EC to James Harlan, July 21, 1866, NARA/RG 48, series 290, box 2. The amount eventually paid to Brumidi for the fresco is not known.
26. The sketch from Laurence Brumidi's estate was purchased at C. G. Sloan Auction Rooms in Washington, D.C., in 1925 by Mr. H. O. Bishop. It was inherited by Mrs. McCook Knox of Washington, D.C.; she left it in 1983 to her daughter Mrs. Richard Austin Smith (Katharine McCook Knox), who put it up for auction in 1984. The sketch was published by Joshua C. Taylor, in *America as Art* (Washington: National Collection of Fine Arts, 1976), p. 15, in *Antiques*, January 1984, p. 35, and in *Katharine McCook Knox and other Collections Sale* (1932) (Washington, D.C.: Sloan, 1984), pp. 108–109. Its present location is unknown. CB to L. M. Morrill, February, 1876, NARA/ RG 46, File SEN 44A, Committee on Appropriations.
27. Greenville County Museum of Art, Greenville, South Carolina, gift of Mr. and Mrs. Charles C. Mickel. Reproduced in *Antiques*, 148 (August 1995), p. 146.
28. *Keim's Capitol Interior and Diagrams* (1874), pp. 25–26.
29. The room was occupied by the Committee on the District of Columbia from 1947 to 1958 and by the Majority Leader in 1959 and 1960.
30. Will P. Kennedy, "Moberly Restoring Brumidi Decorations," pp. 1–2, and 1918, AOC/AR, p. 5. Annual reports of the Architect of the Capitol also mention painting in the room of the sergeant at arms in 1923, 1925, and 1930.
31. The scroll of sketches, thirty feet long and thirteen inches wide, painted in watercolor on kraft paper, was donated to the Architect of the Capitol by Myrtle Cheney Murdock in 1961. She had purchased it from James H. Rove, grandnephew of Lola Kirkwood. John B. Murdock donated the three additional fragments in 1981.
32. George Bancroft, *The History of the Colonization of the United States* (Boston: Charles E. Little and James Brown, 1840), p. 421.
33. Vivien Green Fryd, *Art and Empire: The Politics of Ethnicity in the U.S. Capitol, 1815–1860* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1992), pp. 1523.
34. January 10, 1866, NARA/RG 48, Register, and letter from Harlan to Senator Solomon Foot, January 18, 1866, NARA/RG 48.
35. Laurence Brumidi, "History of the Frieze," pp. 11–12, AOC/CO.
36. CB to EC, August 26, 1876, mentions that Brumidi has completed "Treaty of William Penn" and "Settlement of New England" and has them ready to transfer, AOC/CO. Although Brumidi's date is clearly written, he may have confused the year, for this work would logically have been done in 1878.
37. 1877, AOC/AR, p. 3.
38. "Brumidi's Life Work," *Washington Post*, April 11, 1879, p. 1.
39. The titles of the scenes used here are based on those used at the end of Brumidi's life by the artist himself and Edward Clark and in newspaper articles. However, even he and Clark referred to the scenes with a variety of names, and many variants of titles for each scene were used in subsequent publications.
40. "Brumidi's Life Work," p. 1.
41. "Death of a Great Artist," *Washington Post*, February 20, 1880.
42. The titles of the last scenes were verbally transmitted to the office of the Architect of the Capitol by Cox in 1969 and recorded in a memo, AOC/CO.
43. CB to EC, September 23, 1878, AOC/CO.
44. C. K. Marshall to Secretary Shurz, November 27, 1877, AOC/CO.
45. "Death of Brumidi: the Fresco-painter of the National Capitol," *Philadelphia Daily Evening Telegraph*, February 19, 1880, p. 2 Also described in "Brumidi," *American Architect and Building News* 5, June 11, 1879, p. 16, and "Our Washington Letter," February 4, 1879, clipping in Papers of Isaac Bassett, USSC.
46. CB to EC, September 23, 1878, AOC/CO. CB to EC, December 27, 1878, AOC/CO.
47. CB to EC, August 11, 1879, AOC/CO. CB to EC, September 29, 1879, AOC/CO.
48. "Death of a Great Artist." "History Happily Adorned," *Baltimore Sun*, April 30, 1878, reviewed the work and reported that it was about one-sixteenth complete. This shows that Brumidi's memory of the beginning of May is incorrect. CB to EC, Sept. 23, 1878 and CB to EC, March 22, 1879, AOC/CO.
49. "Brumidi's Life Work," p. 1.
50. Petition of C. Brumidi to Senate and House of Representatives for position on pay roll, November 17, 1879, AOC/CO. The watchman of the Dome who rescued Brumidi was Humphrey N. Lemon; after the artist's death, he asked to have the chair. Lemon to EC, March 20, 1880, AOC/CO.
51. "Death of a Great Artist." "The Allegorical Work at the Capitol," *Forney's Sunday Chronicle*, Oct. 12, 1874, p.4.
52. "Constantino Brumidi," *New York Tribune*, February 20, 1880, p. 5 and "Death of a Great Artist."
53. "Death of a Great Artist."

# The Frieze of the Rotunda



**Note:** This diagram shows the position of each scene in the Rotunda. The numbers correspond to those on the list that follows. The brackets indicate the selections painted by Constantino Brumidi in 1878–1880, Filippo Costaggini in 1881–1889, and Allyn Cox in 1952–1953.



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1. **“America and History.”** Brumidi begins the frieze with allegorical figures. The standing woman wearing a liberty cap and holding a spear and shield and the Indian woman with bow and arrows both represent America, while History records events on a stone tablet, and an eagle perches on the fasces. The bent-over figure at the far left is the farthest-right figure in Brumidi’s intended final scene of the Gold Rush.
2. **“Landing of Columbus.”** Christopher Columbus debarks in 1492 from the *Santa Maria* on a plank, greeted by native Americans. This the first of four scenes of Spanish conquest. Brumidi’s central figure seems to have been inspired by the statue of Columbus by Persico then at the central steps of the Capitol.
3. **“Cortez and Montezuma at Mexican Temple.”** The Spaniard Hernando Cortez, conqueror of Mexico, enters the Aztec temple in 1519. He was welcomed by emperor Montezuma II, who thought Cortez was a god. The calendar stone and idols are based on sketches Brumidi made when he was in Mexico City.
4. **“Pizarro Going to Peru.”** Spanish conqueror of Peru, Francisco Pizarro, leading his horse, pushes through the jungle, searching for the mythical land of gold, heading towards the eventual capture of the Inca capital Cuzco in 1533.
5. **“Burial of DeSoto.”** Spanish explorer Hernando DeSoto died of a fever in 1542 while searching for gold in Florida and the territory north of the Gulf of Mexico. To protect his body from enemies, his men buried him at night in the Mississippi River, which he had been the first European to discover.
6. **“Captain Smith and Pocahontas.”** Pocahontas saves Captain John Smith, one of the founders of Jamestown, Virginia, from being clubbed to death. Her father, Chief Powhatan, is seated at the left. This scene is the first showing English settlement.
7. **“Landing of the Pilgrims.”** A group of Pilgrims, led by William Brewster, is shown giving thanks for their safe voyage after their 1620 arrival in Plymouth, Massachusetts.
8. **“William Penn and the Indians.”** William Penn and his men point out the contents of a chest to the Delaware Indians at the Treaty of Shackamaxon in 1682. The treaty formalized the land grant in Pennsylvania and was the beginning of peaceful relations between the Quakers and the Indians. This is the last scene on which Brumidi worked.
9. **“Colonization of New England.”** Early settlers cut and saw trees and use the lumber to construct a building, possibly a warehouse for their supplies. This is the first scene painted entirely by Costaggini.
10. **“Oglethorpe and the Indians.”** James Oglethorpe, who founded the colony of Georgia and became its first governor, is shown making peace on the site of Savannah in 1733 with the chief of the Muskogee Indians, who presents a buffalo skin decorated with an eagle, symbol of love and protection.
11. **“Battle of Lexington.”** British troops are led by Major Pitcairn, on horseback, whose men fire on colonists gathered at Lexington to stop the British from going on to Concord. This 1775 event began the American Revolution.
12. **“Declaration of Independence.”** This idealized depiction shows the principal authors of the 1776 Declaration of Independence, John Adams, Thomas Jefferson, and Benjamin Franklin, reading the document to colonists in 1776.
13. **“Surrender of Cornwallis.”** General George Washington, on horseback, receives the sword of surrender from Major General O’Hare, who represented Lord Cornwallis after his 1781 defeat at Yorktown, the last battle of the American Revolution.
14. **“Death of Tecumseh.”** During the Battle of the Thames in Upper Canada during the War of 1812, the Indian chief Tecumseh, leader of resistance to American settlement and supporter of the British, is shown just after being shot by Colonel Johnson, on horseback. This 1813 event turned the battle in the favor of the Americans.
15. **“American Army Entering the City of Mexico.”** General Winfield Scott is shown in 1847 being received by Mexicans as he enters the capital, Mexico City, during the Mexican War which followed the admission of Texas to the Union. The bearded face hidden in the tree may be Costaggini’s self-portrait.
16. **“Discovery of Gold in California.”** Prospectors dig and pan for gold, while in the center three men, one of them probably Sutter, examine a nugget. The 1848 discovery of gold at Sutter’s Mill and the subsequent gold rush of 1849 encouraged settlers to move westward. This was the last scene designed by Brumidi and painted by Costaggini.
17. **“Peace at the End of the Civil War.”** The reunion of the country after the end of the Civil War in 1865 is shown by a Confederate and a Union soldier shaking hands. The cotton plant and pine tree symbolize the South and the North. This is the first scene painted by Allyn Cox.
18. **“Naval Gun Crew in the Spanish-American War.”** A gun crew prepares to fire a cannon in one of the great naval battles of the Spanish-American war of 1898, which led to the naval prominence of the United States and its acquisition of Puerto Rico and Guam.
19. **“The Birth of Aviation.”** The scene includes pioneers of flight Leonardo da Vinci, Samuel Pierpont Langley, and Octave Chanute, each holding a model of his invention. Wilbur Wright steadies the wing of the *Flyer* while his brother Orville pilots their first successful flight in 1903; an eagle holding a laurel branch closes the scene.