

Building History and Architectural Chronology

The National Historic Landmark building that houses the Smithsonian American Art Museum and the Smithsonian's National Portrait Gallery is one of the oldest public buildings constructed in early Washington, D.C., and is considered one of the finest examples of Greek Revival architecture in the United States. Several important early American architects were involved in the original design of the building, including Robert Mills (1781–1855), Alexander Jackson Davis (1803–1892), Thomas U. Walter (1804–1887) and William Parker Elliot (1807–1854).

1836

On July 4, President Andrew Jackson authorizes the construction of a fireproof patent office. The site at Eighth and F streets N.W. had been reserved on Pierre L'Enfant's capital city plan for a nondenominational national church or a pantheon for the country's heroes.

1836–1842

The south wing is constructed under the direction of Robert Mills, then the architect of public buildings. The Patent Office moves into the building in 1840. The government's historical, scientific and art collections, including the Declaration of Independence and George Washington's Revolutionary War camp tent, are housed on the third floor, then called the National Gallery.

1849

Construction begins on the east and west wings, initially built under the supervision of Robert Mills, who is replaced in 1851 by Thomas U. Walter, architect of the Capitol.

1854

Clara Barton is hired as a Patent Office clerk. She is the first female government employee to receive the same salary as a man.

1855

The east wing is completed. It is the only portion of the building that remains today as originally constructed. Its lower floors are occupied by the Interior Department, while the soaring space on the top floor is used to display patent models.

1856

The north wing is begun under the supervision of Thomas U. Walter.

1857

The west wing is completed under the supervision of Thomas U. Walter and Edward Clark, his assistant. Its top floor also is used to display patent models. The building becomes a major tourist destination with more than 100,000 visitors annually,

1861–1863

The Civil War suspends construction on the top floor and portico of the north wing in 1861. The building's model halls are used as temporary barracks in the early days of the Civil War and serve as a hospital and morgue after the battles of Manassas (Bull Run), Antietam and Fredricksburg. Walt Whitman tends to wounded Union soldiers here.

1865

On March 6, President Abraham Lincoln's second inaugural ball is held on the third floor of the building.

1865–1868

Edward Clark succeeds Walter as the supervising architect and construction resumes on the north wing which was completed in 1868. The total cost of the building is \$2.3 million.

1872

The exterior portico steps on the south and east wings are modified when the surrounding streets are lowered.

1877–1881

The upper floors of the west and north wings are ravaged by fire in 1877. Nearly 87,000 patent models are destroyed. Adolf Cluss is appointed architect to reconstruct the damaged wings in the popular Victorian “modern Renaissance” style.

1883–1885

Cluss rebuilds the south wing of the third floor, known today as the Great Hall, in a similar Victorian style.

1917

The Department of the Interior vacates the building.

1932

After 92 years, the Patent Office moves out, and the Civil Service Commission moves into offices in the building.

1936

The monumental exterior steps at the south wing are removed to accommodate the widening of F Street; a new entrance is constructed at the first floor.

1953–1955

The building is slated for demolition to make way for a parking garage. The nascent historic preservation movement successfully campaigns to save it and in 1955 President Dwight D. Eisenhower orders that it be preserved.

1958

Congress transfers the building to the Smithsonian to house art collections.

1962–1968

Congress appropriates funds for the building’s renovation in 1962. In 1963, the Civil Service Commission vacates the building. It is designated a National Historic Landmark in 1965. The architectural firm Faulkner, Kingsbury & Stenhouse oversees the building’s transformation into museum galleries.

1968

The Smithsonian American Art Museum and the National Portrait Gallery open to the public.

2000

In January, the National Portrait Gallery and the Smithsonian American Art Museum close the building for extensive renovations.

2005

On Oct. 12, the Smithsonian announces that the two museums and their activities are to be known collectively as the Donald W. Reynolds Center for American Art and Portraiture.

2006

On July 1, the Smithsonian American Art Museum and the National Portrait Gallery open in their gloriously restored historic home in the heart of a revitalized downtown Washington, D.C.