The Senate Vestibule

UNITED
STATES
SENATE

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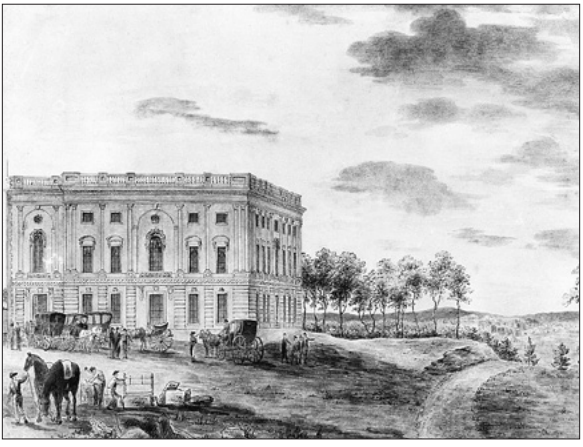
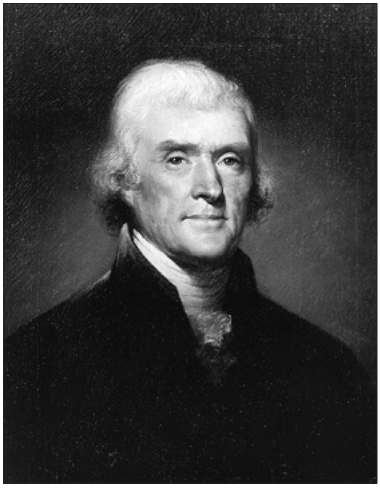
The United States Congress first convened in the Capitol in November 1800, following the federal government's move from Philadelphia to the District of Columbia. Although President Washington laid the Capitol's cornerstone in 1793, construction had proceeded slowly. When Congress arrived, only the north, or Senate, wing was ready for occupancy. Described as a "ponderous unfinished mass of brick and stone," it was surrounded by half a dozen brick homes with farm animals roaming the streets nearby. Thirty-two senators, 106 representatives, the Supreme Court of the United States, the district courts, and the Library of Congress all shared tight quarters in this small, rectangular, sandstone building.



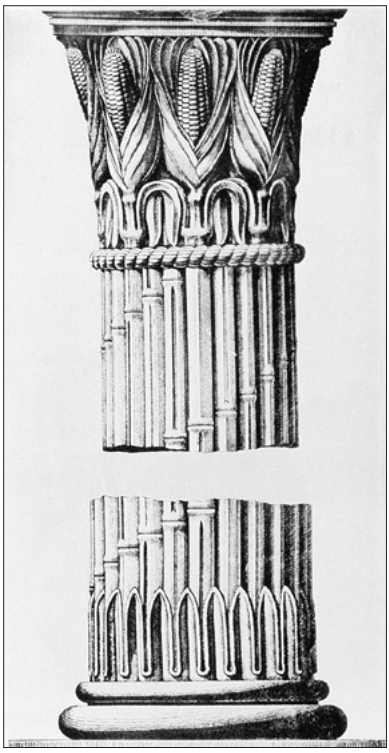
An 1800 view of the Capitol with the north wing completed

At that time, the east door of the Senate wing served as the Capitol's principal entrance, leading to what is now known as the Senate Vestibule—a room with wooden floors, a flat ceiling, and a slightly wider dimension than evident today. President John Adams passed through this hall on November 22, 1800, headed for the nearby Senate Chamber to welcome the members of Congress to their permanent home. Several months later, on March 4, 1801, Thomas Jefferson entered the Capitol through the Senate Vestibule and proceeded to the Senate Chamber to take his oath of office as president. Jefferson took great interest in the construction of Washington's public buildings, especially the Capitol, which he called "the first temple dedicated to the sovereignty of the people."



Portrait of Thomas Jefferson by Rembrandt Peale, 1800

After the House of Representatives moved to the newly constructed south wing in 1807, a complete renovation of the north wing was begun. During this work, Architect Benjamin Henry Latrobe designed a vaulted fireproof ceiling for the Senate Vestibule. To support the weight of the vaults, Latrobe introduced six sandstone



Drawing of corn columns

columns carved by Italian sculptor Giuseppe Franzoni. Rather than simply adopting traditional Greek or Roman column motifs, Latrobe chose to "Americanize" them with capitals featuring ears of corn and shafts carved to resemble bundles of corn stalks. As Latrobe reported to former President Jefferson in August 1809: "These capitals during the summer session obtained me more applause from members of Congress than all the works of magnitude or difficulty that surround them. They christened them the 'corncob capitals'."

In August 1814, during the war with Great Britain, invading troops burned the Capitol and destroyed most of its interior. In the north wing, fire gutted the Senate and Supreme Court Chambers and badly damaged the great staircase that once occu

A mural depicting the burning of the Capitol in 1814, by Allyn Cox in the first floor House wing of the Capitol, 1979

pied the nearby Small Senate Rotunda. Because of its vaulted construction, however, the Senate Vestibule survived relatively unscathed. Latrobe was relieved to discover that his corncob columns were unharmed. Thus, they are among the oldest architectural features in the Capitol. Folklore has often ascribed the small rusty holes in the column shafts to British bullets, but these were actually created over time by the oxidization of iron compounds in the sandstone itself.

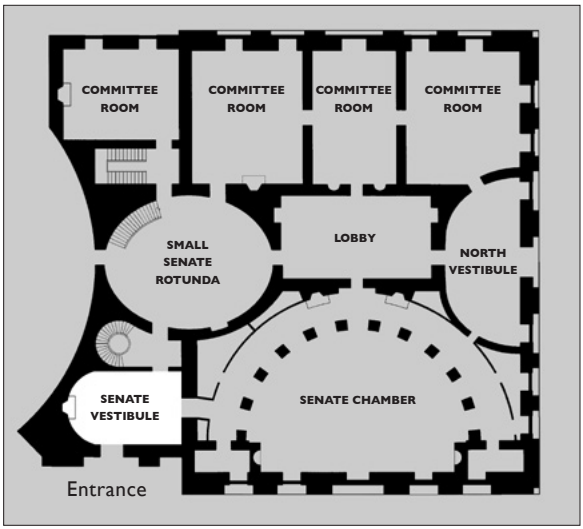
The following decades brought many of America's most prominent statesmen, including senators such as Henry Clay, Daniel Webster, and John C. Calhoun, through the Senate Vestibule. Over time, the Capitol grew with major additions, including new wings for the Senate and House, and a cast-iron dome. In 1962 the east front of the Capitol was extended more than thirty feet and replicated in marble, turning the Senate Vestibule's entrance into an internal doorway. But the architecture of the vestibule remained unchanged, and many of its original features are still visible as testament to its historic past.

View of the Senate Vestibule around 1900

Today, the Senate Vestibule houses marble busts of three patriots widely admired by Americans: the Polish nobleman Tadeusz Kósciuszko, who volunteered to serve in the Continental army during the Revolutionary War; Polish hero Casimir Pulaski, who also fought for American freedom in the Revolutionary War and distinguished himself during the siege of Savannah before dying of war wounds; and Giuseppe Garibaldi, whose fight for the unification of Italy won widespread acclaim in the United States.

Bust of Casimir Pulaski by Henry Dmochowski Saunders, 1857

Millions of visitors pass through the Senate Vestibule each year, just as members of Congress first crossed its threshold two centuries ago when they moved to a new meeting place in a new capital city, and a new era of American government began. This historic space remains a dignified entrance to the oldest portion of the United States Capitol.



First floor plan of the north wing as completed in 1800, conjectural reconstruction, 1997

1800 view of the Capitol courtesy Library of Congress

Portrait of Jefferson courtesy The White House Collection, copyright White House Historical Association

Corn column drawing, Cox painting, first floor plan, and 1900 view of vestibule courtesy Architect of the Capitol

Prepared under the direction of the Secretary of the Senate by the Senate Historical Office and Office of Senate Curator

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