



January 2012

ZOOM

in on america

By the U.S. Missions of Austria and Poland

Volume IV. Issue 1.

Seat of the U.S. Government

A first-time visitor to the United States who travels to the capitals of different states may be a little surprised by the look of the states' government buildings. They all look surprisingly similar - a massive edifice with a tall dome in the middle, long side wings and often a portico supported on tall pillars. They are all huge and usually white or light in color. If they are not located on hills, they stand alone in the middle of perfectly trimmed lawns. Withdrawn from the neighboring buildings, they give the impressed tourist time to contemplate their grandeur on approach. If the tourist happened to visit Washington first, they will see that state capitols follow the style of the most important of them - the Capitol in the country's capital.



U.S. Capitol in Washington, D.C. Photo Bozena Pilat

The U.S. Capitol in Washington, D.C., is the meeting place of the U.S. Congress (the Senate and the House of Representatives.) Located on top of Capitol Hill at the eastern end of the National Mall, it overlooks the American capital. Even though it is not the geographical center of the city, the middle part of Capitol - the Rotunda - is actually treated like the very center and all addresses in Washington, D.C.: NE, NW, SW or SE are designated in relation to it.

The neoclassical architecture of Capitol was meant as

a reference to the power of ancient Rome. The building is 228 meters long at its base while the circular Rotunda, which is 29 meters in diameter, is topped with an impressive dome.

However, Washington Capitol did not always look like that. When it was completed in 1826 it was much smaller, and the dome was half today's height.

Read more to find out how it changed its look.

(continued on p.2)



Capitol in Salt Lake City. Utah follows the style of Washington Capitol. Photo Bozena Pliat

An amateur architect and doctor by education, William Thornton, won the competition for the Capitol's design. In a ceremonious cornerstone laying President George Washington officially started the construction on September 18, 1793.

During construction some changes were made in the original design by a succession of architects who worked on the project. Among them was James Hoban, architect of the White House, who completed the construction of the Capitol's northern wing - used by the Senate - in 1800. His successor, Henry Latrobe, completed the southern wing (used by the House.)

However, the Capitol was not immediately used by the Congress. During the War of 1812 British troops set fire to the Capitol building. Had it not been for a rainstorm, the seat of the Congress would have been totally destroyed. Though the Capitol was saved, it needed a thorough restoration.

Henry Latrobe went back to work. This time he added more redesigns, but it was yet another architect, Charles Bulfinch, who completed the restoration works in 1826.

In the first half of the 19th century the United States experienced an enormous territorial growth. The number of states doubled and so did the number of senators (from 30 to 62) and representatives (from 69 to 233). By 1850 it became clear that Capitol was too small to house the whole legislative body.

Construction, or rather reconstruction works started bringing about the most dramatic changes to the ap-

pearance of the building. Appearing now too small and flat between the newly extended wings, the original dome was torn down and replaced with a three times higher cast-iron dome that resembles the dome of St. Peter's Basilica in Rome. In charge of the 1850s expansion of the Capitol was architect Thomas U. Walter.

Expanding and adding new architectural details to the edifice continued. In 1863, for example, a colossal statue of Freedom was added on top of the dome. A few extensions were made to the entrance. A duplicate of the sandstone East Front was made in marble and placed 10 meters from the old Front. In 1962, the formerly outside wall was incorporated into the building thus becoming the inside wall.

New buildings were constructed in the proximity of the Capitol, in 1897 for the Library of Congress and in 1935 for the Supreme Court. Today's Capitol complex includes the Capitol, six major House and Senate office buildings, three Library of Congress buildings, the Supreme Court Building, the U.S. Botanic Garden, as well as other facilities.

The Capitol has been very popular with tourists who visit Washington. In order to facilitate sightseeing, provide better amenities for the visitors and improve safety and security, the Congress decided to create a modern Visitor Center, which opened in 2008. Today, at the Capitol Visitor Center visitors can gather and view exhibitions and films, participate in guided tours and special events, greet members of Congress, and see firsthand the government at work.



Capitol in Denver, Colorado Photo Bozena Pilat

“Denver Had Never Seen Such a Day”

Erecting a state capitol was a matter of great importance for every state, financially, artistically and logistically. The history of the capitol in Denver, Colorado illustrates how a project like this was realized.

The Seventh Legislative Assembly made Denver the official capital of Colorado on December 9, 1867. Colorado was still a territory at that time - it was admitted to the Union on August 1, 1876 as the 38th state. In 1867 the Capitol Commission was appointed to secure a donation of ten acres of land to be a site for a capitol building. Acquiring land proved an easy task. Henry C. Brown, a local real estate developer, offered the land across East Colfax and Lincoln streets. However, a lack of funds - the total financial assets in 1867 were only \$25,406 - did not allow the city to start the construction.

Upon admission to the Union, the state was asked to select the capital city in a general election. At that point there was a lot of uncertainty about building the capitol in Denver. The situation got tense and Henry Brown filed a deed of revocation reclaiming the land he had donated. Yet, when the election on November 8, 1881 chose Denver as the capital city and Brown's deed was rejected, the prospects of building Colorado capitol on a hillside at Lincoln street in Denver brightened up.

The Board of Capitol Managers was created to supervise

the project. The Board turned to quarries to submit specimens of stone and published a “Notice to Architects” to send in plans for the building.

In the meantime the Board went on a tour of the Midwest to visit the capitals of different states to learn about problems that they encountered while constructing their own capitol buildings.

Again due to the lack of sufficient funds the project had to wait another two years until the Fifth General Assembly allocated sufficient money in 1885.

There were further problems involving contractors prior to starting the construction based on the winning plan by Elijah E. Myers, but when the big day of the Cornerstone Dedication came on July 4, 1890 (23 years after the birth of the idea) the city of Denver was overjoyed. Thousands of visitors arrived by train, the choir which sang at the ceremony consisted of a thousand singers, and there was a procession and speeches. In the sealed copper box that was the cornerstone were among other items copies of the Colorado and Federal constitutions, a Holy Bible, an American Flag, a 1890 Denver City Directory, a map of Colorado and a series of gold coins.

When, in 1908, the dome on the Colorado Capitol in Denver was leafed with gold, the dream of the Colorado citizens finally came true.

ACTIVITY PAGE

EXERCISE 1 GRAMMAR

Put back the 10 prepositions which were removed from the text below (the text comes from the U.S. Capitol Visitor Center website)

The U.S. Capitol is a landmark ...(1) neoclassical architecture. Its designs derived ...(2) ancient Greece and Rome evoke the ideals that guided the nation's founders as they framed their new republic. Within the building you will find majestic paintings, sculptures, and other works of fine art that depict various periods ...(3) American history. The heart ...(4) the Capitol is the Rotunda, a 96-foot-diameter circular hall surmounted ...(5) the Capitol's inner dome. Visible through the eye of the dome, 180 feet above the floor, is a massive fresco painted ... (6) Italian artist Constantino Brumidi. This mural, entitled The Apotheosis of George Washington, consists of a portrait of the nation's first president rising ...(7) the heavens flanked by the allegorical figures of Liberty/Authority and Victory/Fame. They are surrounded ...(8) maidens representing the first thirteen colonies. Around the perimeter, on the ground below, six groups of figures depict War, Science, Marine, Commerce, Mechanics, and Agriculture; in these scenes mythological gods and goddesses interact ...(9) historical figures. Brumidi also designed and started painting the frieze ... (10) the top of the Rotunda walls depicting

EXERCISE 2 SPEAKING

Work in small groups. Look at the photo on the right. Discuss and make a list of symbols that are universally associated with America. What made them become so popular? Compare your list with the ones of other groups.



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