

7a

State Capitol, Columbus, Ohio, 1838–1861

The Ohio State Capitol sits on Capitol Square amid the city bustle of Columbus. Its serene exterior, constructed of native Ohio limestone, gives little indication of the many architects responsible for it, the politics involved, or the time it took to build.

The idea for a new structure to replace the small brick building where the Ohio Legislature had met since 1816 came to fruition in January 1838; the Legislature passed the Ohio Statehouse Bill and the city of Columbus finally seemed secure as the site for the Capitol. The era of Andrew Jackson (1829–1837), with its populist appeal and increasing voter participation, had awakened the self-consciousness of state legislatures. Ohioans were eager to have a structure that expressed their particular identity. As an 1839 building commission report stated: “A state destitute of great public works...is not likely to have its institutions cherished and sustained, and its soil defended.”

The competition for the commission, advertised in Ohio, Philadelphia, New York, and Washington newspapers, drew between fifty and sixty entries. The new capitol was to be in Greek Revival mode, a style that recalled the birthplace of democracy. Three similar designs were chosen by the Capitol Commission as acceptable in 1838. All were compact, rectangular structures that sat on high foundations. The entrances designed by the first- and second-place winners, Henry Walter of Ohio and Martin Thompson of New York, respectively, had projecting porches crowned by pediments (triangular gables). In third place was Thomas Cole, the New York painter (see 5-A), who eliminated the pediment and created the most

compact and horizontal building of them all, articulated by pilasters (square pillars attached to the wall) with inset windows and a stepped-back, columned porch. Although each contestant’s conception was distinct, all the winning designs departed from a strictly Greek style by incorporating a dome.

Still plagued by indecision, the Commission began to lay the foundation for the Capitol in 1838. Cole’s design was chosen (with modifications) as the favored one in 1839, although the reasons underlying this are unclear. Unlike the other entrants, the painter had no solid experience in building and used the expertise of his draughtsman nephew to help him draw up his plans. Cole did have architectural pretensions, however, and had listed himself as an architect in the 1834–1835 New York architects’ directory. Moreover, he had lived in Ohio in his youth and was a close friend of William Adams, a member of the Capitol Commission. On receiving third place, Cole wrote Adams to complain, “In justice, I ought to have *first* premium.”

Probably as consolation, Walter, the first-place winner, was appointed supervisor of the works. The cornerstone was laid on July 4, 1839, and by the end of the year, the walls of the Capitol’s foundation, erected with convict labor, were well underway. However, economic factors caused by the bank panic of 1837 and a failed resolution to relocate the capital away from Columbus left the project stagnant for eight years, a pasture for livestock. Work resumed in 1848, and from that point until the Capitol’s completion in 1861, four more architects would put their imprint on the building and wrestle with the Legislature and the Commission, all but the last to resign in frustration.

The design of the Ohio Capitol took its final form between 1848 and 1854 under the guidance of William Russell West, who brought the Doric columns of the porch in line with the body of the building, adhering to the compact form of Cole’s original plan. West is also responsible for the rather small, eccentric pediment that seems to float over the porch and shields the observer’s eye from the base of the drum lying behind it. His most obvious change, however, was in the temple-like cupola that stands over the drum, encasing the interior rotunda windows. By dispensing with the dome and substituting a conical roof, West adhered not only to budgetary concerns, but to the spirit of Greek Revival.

The Ohio State Capitol, restored in 1993, is testament to a period that expressed its democratic ideals in monumental form. Its pair of recessed porches, with their eight columns, bows to the scheme for the east and west fronts of the Parthenon in Athens. The cupola also refers to another type of Greek temple, the round *tholos*. Cole’s inspiration for pilasters instead of columns to articulate the cupola and the body of the building gives the Capitol a regular, stately rhythm, entirely fitting for the seat of government. A structure, as the 1839 Commission stated, meant “not for ourselves only, but for future generations.”



7-A Ithiel Town and A. J. Davis, architects; design largely by Thomas Cole, Ohio State Capitol, Columbus, Ohio, 1838–1861. Photograph © Tom Patterson, Cincinnati, Ohio.

TEACHING ACTIVITIES

E = ELEMENTARY | M = MIDDLE | S = SECONDARY

Encourage students to look closely at all the different parts of this building.

DESCRIBE AND ANALYZE E | M | S

Have students compare this building to the modern ones behind it.

The modern buildings are taller with flat roofs and many more windows.

Why is this nineteenth-century building shorter than the modern ones?

Building materials and techniques of this era limited the height of buildings. Also elevators were not common in buildings until later in the century.

E | M | S

Show students pictures of Greek temples such as the Parthenon. (They are plentiful on the Internet.)

Explain that the Ohio State Capitol is an example of Greek Revival, a popular nineteenth-century architectural style based on classical Greek and Roman structures. Ask students how this resembles Greek architecture.

It has columns, a pediment, and is symmetrical. Like the ruins of ancient Greek buildings, which have been stripped of color, it is built of light stone.

M | S

Locate and identify these architectural features that are found on classical Greek and Roman architecture.

Pediment: *It is the triangle above the entrance.*

Columns: *They are the upright posts in the shape of cylinders on the porch.*

Capitals: *They sit like hats at the very top of the columns; the simple capitals are a variation of the Greek Doric style.*

Pilasters: *These are the vertical structures that resemble columns, but are instead attached to the walls on each side of the porch.*

Drum: *It is the round doughnut-shaped structure at the top that supports the conical roof. It is not visible in this view.*

Entablature: *It is the two-part horizontal band supported by the column capitals and pilasters.*

M | S

How did the architects create a sense of harmony in this building?

They constructed most of the building from the same light limestone and repeated the shape and equal spacing of the pilasters and columns in a steady rhythm across the façade.

INTERPRET M | S

Ask students to explain why Greek Revival was a popular architecture style for government buildings in the nineteenth century.

Ancient Greece invented democracy as a form of government. At this time in history, Americans were becoming more democratic with increased voter participation and awareness of their state legislatures, and states wished to express their identity in their statehouses.

S

Explain how the architect for this project was selected.

Architects submitted designs in a competition. Three top finalists, including landscape painter Thomas Cole, were selected.

Even though Cole lacked building experience, his design was chosen.

CONNECTIONS **Historical Connections:** Northwest Ordinances; statehood
Historical Figures: Thomas Jefferson

Civics: role of state government
Geography: state capitals

Arts: Greek Revival; Doric mode; Thomas Cole