INTRODUCTION

BY CHARLES MOORE, PH.D.

HISTORICALLY the Capitol at Washington is the most important structure in the United States. Other buildings, such as the Old South Church in Boston and Independence Hall in Philadelphia, are connected with important episodes in the history of this country. The Capitol is unique in that it both typifies the beginning and also marks the growth of the nation. Like the great Gothic cathedrals of Europe, its surpassing merit is not its completeness, but its aspirations. Like them, too, the Capitol is not a creation, but a growth, and its highest value lies in the fact that it never was, and it never will be, finished.

They misread history who see in the location of the seat of government at Washington only the clever bargain of scheming politicians. The great centralizing forces that found expression in the adoption of the Constitution, the assumption of the State debts, and the creation of a national bank, had their chief support in the commercial North; whereas the agricultural South, fearing an oligarchy of wealth only less than the monarchy so lately cast off, found in the removal of the national capital to the banks of the Potomac a promise that the legislators of the new nation would be removed from the domination of the commercial spirit so powerful in the business centers of New York and Philadelphia.

Washington, having thrown his great influence on the side of a strong central Government, gave to the location of the Federal City his personal attention, even to small details; and after the site was selected and the city was laid out his chief concern was the construction of the Capitol on a scale that would comport with the dignity of the great and powerful nation that he confidently expected the United States would become. Much has been written of the magnificence of the plans made by the founders of the District of Columbia, and so sober an historian as Hildreth speaks with quiet sarcasm of laying out a city for a million people. As a matter of fact, within two generations after the removal of the seat of government to the District of Columbia fewer than a quarter of a million people had not only occupied L'Enfant's city, but had also spread themselves beyond the city boundaries, creating ill-arranged subdivisions that must mar the beauty and symmetry of Washington for generations yet to come. However magnificent the plans of the founders may have seemed, time has proved that they were not extensive enough.

During the closing years of the eighteenth century the time had come for building a great edifice as the home of the National Legislature. The forces making for disintegration had spent themselves in a vain opposition to the adoption of the Constitution, and were not set in motion again until after the Government had become so firmly established as to enable it to resist all attacks on the supremacy of the nation above the States. From a vague abstraction the nation had grown to be a concrete fact. True, the actual accomplishment was but meager when compared with the ideal that existed in the minds of the fathers, and there were those among the wise who feared that the goal would prove to be a New World monarchy. Still, throughout the land the idea prevailed that a permanent government had been established; that progress was assured; that law would be enforced and property be safe. Thus permanence of material interests, the primal condition of all great building, had become an accomplished fact.

Then, too, the American mind had expanded. The Revolution had made neighbors of the colonies; and the very delay over the adoption

of the Articles of Confederation had fostered the national idea. Maryland having refused to assent to the compact until those States which claimed title to western lands should make surrender of their title to the nation, actually forced such sessions; and when the treaty of 1783 gave to the United States as common property an empire beyond the Ohio, the people began to feel that national pride which always seeks expression in worthy monuments. Before work on the Capitol began, the American settler had established himself not only north of the Ohio, but also in foreign territory beyond the Mississippi, and a continental nation was clearly foreshadowed. The prophetic utterances of European statesmen at the time when the independence of the United States was acknowledged by England were fast being realized, and the historic consciousness of our people was ready to manifest itself.

It is true that the cost of the Capitol and other public buildings was to be paid in large part from the proceeds of lots sold in the Federal City; but these lots were sold not only to people in various States, but also to foreigners, all of whom had faith in the future greatness of the capital of the new Republic, and who realized that the money so received was to be expended in public buildings of a permanent character.

In the plans for and the construction of the Capitol Washington exercised a determining influence. The structure was to be essentially the great building of the nation. The President's House and the Department buildings might await a fuller treasury, and even the Capitol itself might be constructed one part at a time, but a sufficient portion properly to house the Congress must be completed by the time set for the transfer of the seat of government to its permanent location. "It may be relied on," writes Washington to the Commissioners, "it is the progress of that building that is to inspire or depress public confidence;" and he required—such is his word—that they carry out his ideas in this matter.

It appears from the records that the selection of a plan for the Capitol was a matter of great concern to the two laymen who were at that time perhaps best qualified to judge the merits of the sketches presented—Washington and Jefferson. Washington indeed professed to have no knowledge of architecture, and was ready to be governed by "the rules laid down by the professors of the art." What he sought, however, were the essential qualities in all good architecture—a combination of grandeur, simplicity, and convenience. That is to say, while he professed no knowledge of the processes by which results were reached, his natural good taste enabled him to select from among many plans the one that combined those qualities which a truly great building must possess. So, too, Jefferson approved Dr. Thornton's plan because it was "simple, noble, beautiful." It is interesting to note that both of these great men recognized the element of simplicity as of first consideration; for the chief source of weakness in American architecture during the period covered by our rapid commercial development has been the absence of this quality, just as the great hope for future architectural excellence is found in the gradual return to it.

Thornton, the architect of the Capitol, was by birth a West Indian, as was also Alexander Hamilton; and this nation owes to those islands a debt of gratitude that will endure while the Capitol stands and while our financial system remains essentially unchanged. When and where Thornton studied architecture is unknown; but we do know that imitative drawing was one of his early accomplishments and that wide travel in Europe enriched a mind peculiarly versatile and of remarkable power in mastering the details of intricate subjects. It has been said that he studied architecture less than a year. Probably he was a life-long student of this greatest among the arts, and it has been demonstrated that he had an intuitive sense as to its essentials.

Dr. Thornton's plan was well adapted to find favor with those most interested in the selection of a suitable design for the nation's Capitol. When Rome borrowed from Greece and adapted to her own larger purposes and more varied needs the most beautiful of architectural forms,

succeeding ages gained a common medium of expression in building. The problem that presented itself to the architect became one of proportion, of harmony, of perfection of workmanship. Pediment and entablature, column and pilaster, even triglyph and scamillus had their laws derived from that most perfect of buildings, the Parthenon at Athens. The charm of simplicity, the beauty of line, the harmony of the parts, all subject to established and recognized laws, were the common language of architecture the world over.

These forms appealed to the spirit of the time in which the Capitol was built. Men of education and culture in those days were trained in the literature and political ideas of Greece and Rome. The strength and the weakness of their institutions pointed every moral and adorned every tale. Roman names were given to new towns springing up in the wilderness, the sites of colleges were named Athens, and the public square was known as the Campus Martius. Life in the cities was simple, but stately; form and ceremony were observed even among those who principles were most strongly republican. Equality of man was equality before the law, not familiarity among persons differing radically from one another in manners, education, and modes of thought.

Originality beyond such as arose from an adaptation of the building to its situation and the uses for which it was designed was not thought of by Dr. Thornton; and indeed had the idea of attempting to originate a style of architecture been suggested to his trained mind, he must have rejected it as surely as he would have rejected the idea of inventing a new language in which to express his thoughts. Even the eye untrained to architectural niceties fails not at a glance to see how immeasurably Thornton's plans are superior to the others submitted in the competition. From its very beginning the Capitol has been an imposing structure. None of the departures from the original designs have interfered seriously with the simplicity and dignity of the building, and within its walls beauty of form and richness of execution are manifest, so that to this day mantels of rare beauty, moldings exquisitely executed, and columns of satisfactory proportions and with charmingly ornamented capitals reward the searcher into the dim and almost neglected portions of the original building. Those persons most appreciate the Capitol who are daily called on to thread its labyrinths, to learn the history of its various rooms, and to familiarize themselves with the adaptations which the growth of the country and of the public business have brought about.

The Capitol has ever been the peculiar charge of the President of the United States. Jefferson, who had been associated with Washington in the selection of the original plans, took a keen personal interest in the completion of the north wing. With none of the modesty that his illustrious predecessor had professed as to a knowledge of architecture, Jefferson undertook to say which one of the Grecian buildings should serve as a model for the builders; and he also watched over Thornton's plans to save them from serious change at the hands of zealous superintendents eager to magnify their office and to put the impress of their importance on the designs. The idea of building the Capitol from the proceeds of the sale of District of Columbia lands was early abandoned, and Congress began to place in the hands of the President sums of money to spend upon the extension and completion of the building.

The burning of the Capitol by the British during the war of 1812 was deeply resented by the American people, as an outrage against those laws of civilized warfare which protect public edifices as monuments of the arts. From the date of the destruction of the building, in August, 1814, until December, 1819, Congress occupied other quarters. Happily the strong walls withstood the effects of the fire, and, thanks to President Madison, Thornton's plans were not materially altered either in the rebuilding or in the construction of the central portion, begun in 1818, under the superintendence of Charles Bulfinch.

The idea of making the Rotunda of the Capitol a mausoleum of Washington met with the favor of Congress; a resolution was passed to carry out the plan, and the consent of the Washington family was obtained. In his first message President John Quincy Adams called the attention of Congress to the fact that "a spot has been reserved within the walls where you are deliberating for the benefit of this and future ages, in which the mortal remains may deposited of him whose spirit hovers over you and listens with delight to every act of the representatives of his nation which can tend to exalt his and their country." Much to President Adams's disappointment, however, Virginia protested against the removal of Washington's remains from Mount Vernon, and in 1832 the owner of that estate withdrew the family consent.

In 1850, when the President of the United States had placed at his command the sum of $100,000 for the extension of the Capitol according to such plan as he might approve and by such architect as he should appoint, competition again failed to yield satisfactory results, and a combination and adaptation of the various plans was decided upon. "It was desirable," wisely says President Fillmore, "not to mar the harmony and beauty of the present building, which as a specimen of architecture is so universally admired. Keeping these objects in view, I concluded to make the additions by wings detached from the present building, yet connected with it by corridors. This mode of enlargement will leave the present Capitol uninjured." These simple words of President Fillmore give no hint of what actually took place at a crisis in the history of the Capitol. Congress, having placed the charge of the extension in the hands of the Chief Magistrate, undertook, through one of its committees, to obtain plans for the work; but President Fillmore, ignoring the legislative branch of the Government, set himself resolutely to the task Congress itself had imposed upon him. Fortunately he selected as the architect Thomas U. Walter, a man who proved great enough to design the wings in conformity with the central building. Thornton himself, had he lived long enough to do the work, could not have carried out his own plans in greater perfection of detail. As a result the Capitol stands today an architectural unit.

When the time came to lay the corner stone of the addition to the Capitol, the day selected was the Fourth of July, in the year 1851, and the orator named by President Fillmore was Daniel Webster, then Secretary of State. "Who does not feel," exclaimed Mr. Webster, "that when President Washington laid his hand on the foundation of the first Capitol, he performed a great work of perpetuation of the Union and the Constitution." To the prophetic vision of the orator the great storm, then a decade in the future, loomed dark and ominous; and with all the great eloquence at his command, he used the natal day of the Republic and the building of the Capitol as texts of an impassioned appeal for the stability of the Union of the States. As he closed his address, he turned to the President with these words: "President Fillmore, it is your singularly good fortune to perform an act such as that which the earliest of your predecessors performed fifty-eight years ago. You stand where he stood; you lay your hand on the corner stone of a building designed greatly to extend that whose corner stone he laid. Changed, changed is everything around. The same sun indeed shone on his head that now shines on yours. The same broad river rolled at his feet, and bathes his last resting place, that now rolls at yours. But the site of the city was then mainly an open field. Streets and avenues have since been laid out and completed, squares and public grounds inclosed and ornamented, until the city which bears his name, although comparatively inconsiderable in numbers and wealth, has become quite fit to be the seat of government of a great and united people. Sir, may the consequences of the duty you perform so auspiciously to-day equal those which flowed from his act."[1]

[1] Webster's Works, Vol. II, p. 620.

It is told of President Lincoln that during the civil war he required that work on the new Dome should not cease, so that in the continued progress of this crowning feature of the Capitol all might see typified the continued unity and strength of the United States. He knew that he could calculate on the affectionate regard of the people for their historic building. How strong this regard was, even at the South, is well illustrated by an incident that Charles Sumner has related in one of his letters to John Bright. At the conclusion of the historic conference that took place at Hampton Roads, February 3, 1865, between President Lincoln and Secretary Seward on one side, and Alexander H. Stephens, R. M. T. Hunter, and John A. Campbell on the other, Mr. Hunter, who had spent nearly all his life in Washington,[2] said to Mr. Seward: "Governor, how is the Capitol? Is it finished?" "This," writes Sumner, "gave Seward an opportunity of picturing the present admired state of the works, with the Dome completed, and the whole constituting one of the magnificent edifices of the world."[3]

Of all the statesmen who have learned to love and venerate the Capitol, perhaps none was more competent than Senator Sumner to pass judgment upon it. He spoke from daily familiarity with its Chambers, its corridors, its committee rooms; day after day he had watched the winter sun, shining from a cloudless sky, strike full upon the noble pile, as dazzling as the marbles of Greece; his cultivated eye had reveled in the play of light and shade upon portico and column; to his historic sense painting, bust, and statue appealed, even though their artistic value might be small; and from a bed of torture in a foreign land memory had recalled the sacred walls that inclosed his seat, kept vacant by an outraged Commonwealth. In a speech in the Senate, uttered in unavailing protest at the proposed desecration of the Capitol by placing in it an unworthy statue of Lincoln, Mr. Sumner said:

"Surely this National Capitol, so beautiful and interesting, and already historic, should not be opened to the rude experiment of untried talent. Only the finished artist should be admitted here. Sir, I doubt if you consider enough the edifice in which we are assembled. Possessing the advantage of an incomparable situation, it is among the first-class structures of the world. Surrounded by an amphitheater of hills, with the Potomac at its feet, it may remind you of the Capitol in Rome, with the Alban and Sabine hills in sight, and with the Tiber at its feet. But the situation is grander than that of the Roman Capitol. The edifice itself is not unworthy of the situation. It has beauty of form and sublimity in proportion, even if it lacks originality in conception. In itself it is a work of art. It should not receive in the way of ornamentation anything which is not a work of art. Unhappily, this rule is too often forgotten, or there would not be so few pictures and marbles about us which we are glad to recognize. But bad pictures and ordinary marbles warn us against adding to their number."

"Pardon me if I call attention for one moment to the few works of art in the Capitol which we might care to preserve. Beginning with the Vice-President's room, we find an excellent and finished portrait of Washington by Peale. This is much less known than the familiar portrait by Stuart, but it is well worthy to be cherished. I never enter that room without feeling its presence. Traversing the corridors, we find ourselves in the spacious Rotunda, where are four pictures by Trumbull, truly historic in character, by which great scenes live again before us. These works have a merit of their own which will always justify the place they occupy. Mr. Randolph, with ignorant levity, once characterized that which represents the signing of the Declaration of Independence as a 'shin piece.' He should have known that there is probably no

[2] Robert Mercer Taliaferro Hunter was a member of Congress from Virginia from 1837 to 1843, and Speaker of the House from 1839 to 1841; he was a United States Senator from 1847 to 1861; then was successively the Confederate Secretary of State and a Confederate Senator. In 1877 he was treasurer of Virginia.

[3] Pierce's Memoir and Letters of Charles Sumner, Vol. IV, p. 205.

picture having so many portraits less obnoxious to the gibe. If these pictures do not belong to the highest art, they can never fail in interest to the patriotic citizen, while the artist will not be indifferent to them. One other picture in the Rotunda is not without merit. I refer to the Landing of the Pilgrims, by Weir, where there is a certain beauty of color and a religious sentiment; but this picture has always seemed to me exaggerated rather than natural. Passing from the Rotunda to the House of Representatives, we stand before a picture which, as a work of art, is perhaps the choicest of all in the Capitol. It is a portrait of Lafayette by that consummate artist who was one of the glories of France, Ary Scheffer. He sympathized with our institutions, and this portrait of the early friend of our country was a present from the artist to the people of the United States. Few who look at it by the side of the Speaker's chair are aware that it is the production of the rare genius which gave to mankind the Christus Consolator and the Francesca da Rimini.

"Turning from painting to sculpture, we find further reason for caution. The lesson is taught especially by the work of the Italian, Persico, on the steps of the Capitol, called by him Columbus, but called by others 'a man rolling nine pins;' for the attitude and the ball he holds suggests this game. Near to this is a remarkable group by Greenough, where the early settler is struggling with the savage; while opposite, in the yard, is the statue of Washington by the same artist, which has found little favor because it is nude, but which shows a mastery of art. There also are the works of Crawford—the *alto-rilievo* which fills the pediment over the great door of the Senate Chamber, and the Statue of Liberty which looks down from the top of the Dome, attesting a genius which must always command admiration. There are other statues by a living artist. There are also the bronze doors by Rogers, on which he labored long and well. They belong to a class of which there are only a few specimens in the world, and I have sometimes thought they might vie with those famous doors at Florence which Michael Angelo hailed as worthy to be the gates of Paradise. Our artist has pictured the whole life of Columbus in bronze, while portraits of contemporary princes and of great authors who have illustrated the life of the great discoverer add to the completeness of this artistic work." [4]

It has been said that the Capitol is not a creation, but a growth. The same is true of the city of Washington. The evolution of both city and building was accomplished through long and trying years. The scale which now seems too small then seemed too great. The history of the first half-century of Washington is a tale of inconveniences. Historian and traveler vie with each other in comparing the opulence of promise with the poverty of performance, and it is only since the civil war that the dream of the founders has begun to be realized. In 1808 the House of Representatives seriously debated the question of escaping the inconveniences of a miserable straggling village and a hall ill adapted to either speakers or hearers by a return of the seat of government to Philadelphia; but political considerations caused the defeat of the proposition by a small majority. The present Senate Chamber, which when first occupied seemed so large as compared with the small room in which the oratory of Webster and his associates added rich stores to the literature of statesmanship, is to-day none too extensive for the transaction of public business for forty-five States; and the time will soon come when the House of Representatives must change radically the present theory that a legislative chamber can also be made to serve as the place of business of the individual member. Even as these words are being written the sound of the workman's hammer breaks the vacation stillness, as the transformation into committee rooms of the space long used for the Library of Congress is being accomplished.

The story of the building of the Capitol and of its adornment, as related by Mr. Glenn Brown in the following pages, has never before

[4] Sumner's Works, Vol. X, p. 543.

been told with any degree of fullness or of accuracy. For a decade he has been gathering the plans and illustrations; his search has been both keen and unremitting, and it has been prosecuted as a labor of love and of inherited attachment for the Capitol. The photographs and prints herein reproduced have commanded the attention of architects throughout the country, who have known something of them through exhibitions of a portion of them in several cities and by the more or less satisfactory reproduction of some of them in architectural journals; and it is a matter of satisfaction, not only to students of architecture and of the history of the fine arts in America, but also to the public generally, that he has freely placed in this permanent form a collection of drawings possessing so great an architectural value and appealing so strongly to the historic consciousness of our people. Those who, by reason of long association with the Capitol, have learned to appreciate the appeal it makes to the American mind and heart will best understand the obligation under which the author has placed his readers.

CHARLES MOORE.