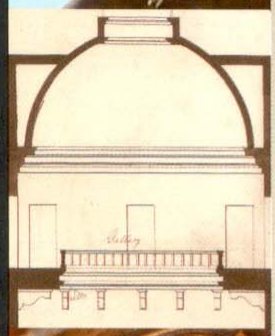


The Capitol of Virginia

From Colony to Commonwealth: America's Oldest Government

The Virginia General Assembly is the oldest, continuous, English-speaking lawmaking body in the New World. The first session of the Virginia legislature took place in the church at Jamestown during the summer of 1619, twelve years after the founding of the Virginia colony and more than a year before the Pilgrims landed at Plymouth. Over the last four centuries, Virginia's government has met in churches, homes, a college hall, taverns and hotels, commercial buildings, and several different statehouses.

Jamestown, the first permanent English settlement in the New World, served as the capital of the Virginia colony until 1699 when Williamsburg became the second seat of government. In 1780, during the Revolutionary War, the General Assembly moved Virginia's capital to Richmond, which was "more safe and central than any other town situated on navigable water." The Assembly met for several years in two frame warehouses located near the riverfront at the northwest corner of Cary and 14th Streets until a new Capitol could be built on Shockoe Hill.

The Great Seal of the Commonwealth of Virginia. During the expansion of the Capitol, 1904-06, the State Seal was incorporated into this doorknob detail.

Facing page: *The Capitol of Virginia, south elevation. Both architectural landmark and working seat of government, the Capitol introduced the temple-form Monumental Classical style to the New World.*

Left: *"City of Richmond, Virginia. From the Hill Above the Waterworks." Color lithograph, published by Lewis P. Clover, New York, 1834. The Capitol dominated the Richmond skyline throughout the nineteenth century.*

The Virginia State Capitol

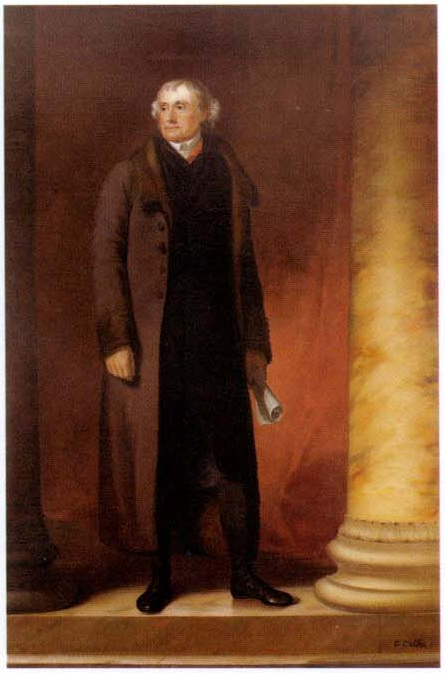
The present Capitol building in Richmond has served the Commonwealth longer than any of its predecessors. It ranks as the second oldest working capitol in the United States, having been in continuous use since 1788. Only the Maryland statehouse at Annapolis, completed in 1779, has been in service longer. The Virginia State Capitol is also recognized as an internationally significant architectural landmark. The original structure, designed by Thomas Jefferson, is believed to be the modern world's first major public building designed as a Classical Roman temple. This Classical style has had a significant impact on the design of schools, libraries, courthouses, and churches across the country.

Maison Carrée, Nîmes, France. From "Antiquités de la France," by Charles-Louis Clérisseau, second edition, 1804.

In March 1785, the Directors of Public Buildings asked Thomas Jefferson, then Minister to France, "to consult an able Architect on a plan fit for a Capitol," and emphasized that the design should "unite economy with elegance and utility." Jefferson, who thought the new Capitol should be designed after a Classical temple, secured the services of Charles-Louis Clérisseau, a well-known French draftsman and authority on Classical buildings. Jefferson considered the Maison Carrée, a Roman temple built in Nîmes, France during the first century AD, to be both beautiful and "noble beyond expression." With encouragement from Clérisseau, Jefferson eventually chose it as the primary model for Virginia's Capitol.

The cornerstone of the Capitol was laid on August 18, 1785, at the site atop Shockoe Hill, and construction of the foundation began, even though the plans did not arrive from Paris until the following spring. Nearly a year later, a detailed plaster model of the Capitol, ordered by Jefferson to serve as a model for the craftsmen working on the outside of the building, arrived in Virginia. This model, prepared by the French artisan Jean-Pierre Fouquet, has been preserved since that time and is displayed in the Capitol.

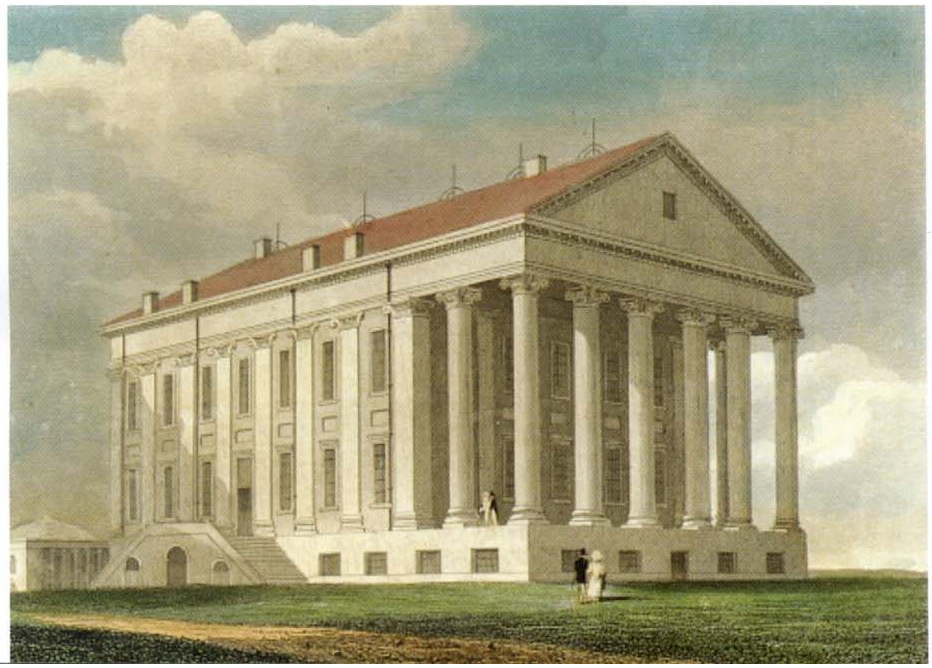
The original building, which is now the central portion of the Capitol, was a rectangular structure with two principal stories above a high basement. It was built of hand-made brick and its walls were three to five feet thick. Although the building was not yet completed, the Assembly held its first session in the Capitol in October 1788. The portico on the south side of the Capitol was erected around 1790, and the brick walls remained bare until 1798 when they were covered with stucco and painted. "Even in its present unfinished state," wrote a visitor in 1796, "the building is, beyond comparison, the finest, the most noble, and the greatest, in all America." The temple on the hill was an imposing structure that was visible from a distance, and from the portico there was a clear view south to the river. Although it served as the Capitol of the Confederacy from 1861 until 1865, the building escaped damage during the Civil War and was visited by President Abraham Lincoln two days after Southern troops evacuated Richmond.



Above: *American artist George Catlin based this full-length portrait of Thomas Jefferson, painted around 1827, on an earlier portrait by Thomas Sully.*

Top Left: *The 1786 plaster model of the Capitol is thought to be the earliest surviving work of master French model-maker Jean-Pierre Fouquet.*

Left: *One of the most popular images of the Capitol was illustrated by William Goodacre, Jr., and first published in 1831.*



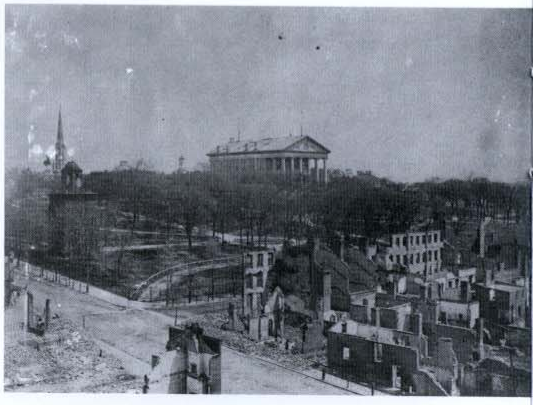
Left: *"The Fall of Richmond, Va. on the Night of April 2D 1865." Color lithograph, published by Currier & Ives, 1865.*

Below: *Although much of downtown Richmond was a smoldering ruin in April 1865, the Capitol, Executive Mansion, and Capitol Square emerged intact. This photograph, taken shortly after the evacuation of Confederate forces, shows the picturesque landscape designed for Capitol Square by John Notman in 1850.*

Alterations, Repairs, and Expansions

The floor plan of the original building has changed a number of times. In Jefferson's plan, the Hall of the House of Delegates and the General Courtroom were on the main (second) floor, and the Executive and Senate chambers were on the upper (third) floor. In the early 1840s, the locations of the Senate Chamber and the General Courtroom were reversed. During the Civil War, numerous renovations allowed the Virginia and Confederate Senates to assemble on the third floor, while the Confederate House of Representatives met on the second floor in a chamber at the south end of the Capitol. The Commonwealth's library was located on the third floor for much of the nineteenth century. The office of the Governor, which is currently on the third floor, has moved several times.

On April 27, 1870, the Capitol was the scene of the "Capitol Disaster." The Supreme Court of Appeals, meeting on the upper floor, was hearing a case that attracted too many spectators. The balcony and floor



of the crowded courtroom collapsed into the Hall of the House of Delegates below; 62 persons were killed and another 251 injured. The Governor and Assembly reoccupied the Capitol in October 1870 after the necessary repairs were completed.

By the turn of the twentieth century, legislative and executive offices were outgrowing the original 146' by 84' structure and the decision was made to enlarge the Capitol. Between 1904 and 1906, two flanking wings were added to the original building. The east wing became the Chamber of the House of Delegates and the west wing became the Chamber of the Senate. Granite steps were added to the south portico and a formal entrance hall leading from the portico to the Rotunda was cut through part of the Old Senate Chamber. Since then, the Capitol has undergone only minor exterior changes and interior upgrades.

Today, the Virginia State Capitol is a magnificent monument to Virginia's past as it continues to serve the current needs of the Commonwealth.

Above: *An example of the many fossils visible in the floor of the Rotunda, made from limestone that is 400 to 450 million years old.*

Below: *A post-card view of the Capitol, taken shortly before the addition of the two wings in 1904-06.*

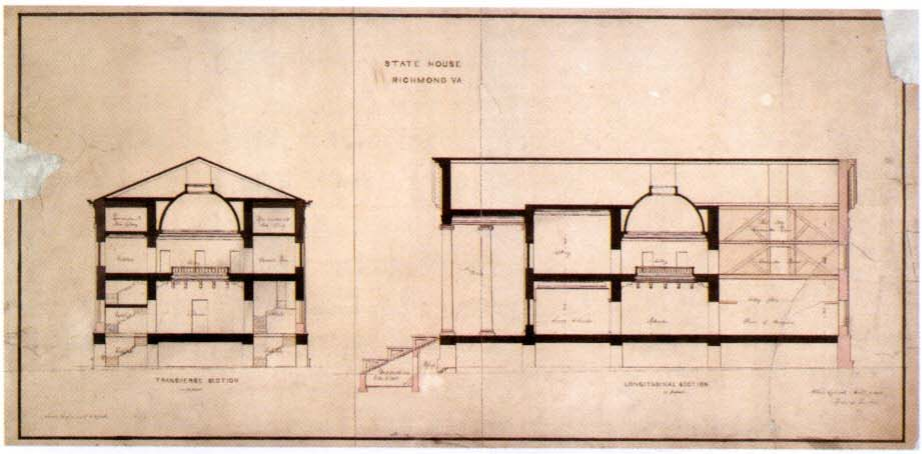
The Capitol's Rotunda

At the center of the Capitol is the Rotunda, a magnificent two-story space capped by a dome and illuminated by skylights. Since the builders of the Capitol cleverly constructed the Rotunda's dome beneath the pitch of the gable roof, it is invisible from the exterior of the building. In the tradition of grand spaces he saw in Europe, Jefferson envisioned this central room in the Capitol as an impressive formal setting for Virginia's most treasured work of art: a magnificent life-sized statue of George Washington.

In June 1784, the General Assembly commissioned a statue of Washington to be made "of the finest marble and best workmanship" as a tribute to the great commander. Governor Benjamin Harrison wrote to Thomas Jefferson, who was serving on a diplomatic mission in Paris, and asked him to engage a sculptor. Jefferson secured the services of Jean-Antoine Houdon, a noted French artist. In the fall of 1785, just as Clérisseau was completing the plans for the Capitol, Houdon visited Mount Vernon to study the General. He made a plaster mask of Washington's head, took detailed measurements of his body, and modeled a terra cotta bust. The resulting life-sized statue, carved of Carrara marble, was shipped to America in 1796. Since its arrival in Virginia, the statue

Facing page: *The Rotunda, naturally lit from above by skylights, is the setting for Houdon's statue of George Washington.*

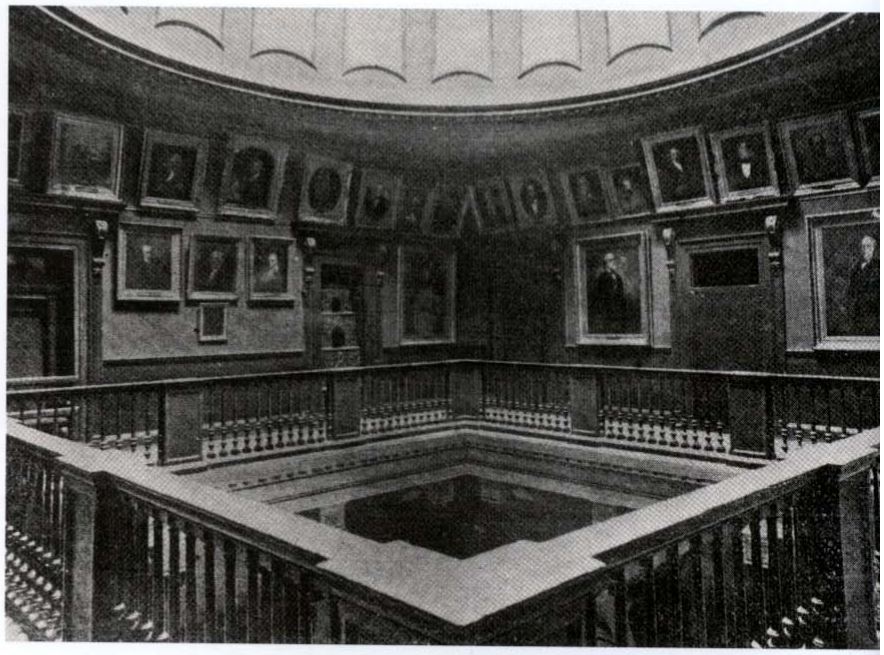
Above: *Sculpted by Jean-Antoine Houdon from life in 1786, this bust of the Marquis de Lafayette reflects Virginia's gratitude to the young Revolutionary War hero and the Commonwealth's first honorary citizen.*



Left: *In 1858, architect Albert Lybrock made measured drawings of the Capitol in preparation for proposed renovations to the building. His longitudinal section shows the meeting spaces for the House of Delegates and the Senate on the main floor. It also shows how the Rotunda's dome is hidden under a gable roof. Most of Lybrock's proposed changes were never implemented.*

has stood in the center of the Capitol's Rotunda. It was viewed by many of Washington's contemporaries, all of whom attested that it was a perfect likeness of their beloved leader.

Houdon's statue alludes to the similarities between Washington and the ancient Roman General Cincinnatus who, when Rome no longer needed him, gave up his military power and returned to the simple life of a farmer. The artist carefully balanced the military and civilian elements of Washington's career: his sword is by his side, he rests his left hand on a fasces (a bundle of rods, which was a Roman symbol of power), but he carries a civilian walking cane and stands over a plough. Washington wears his Revolutionary uniform, but his head is uncovered and his facial expression is tender. Houdon's monument to America's foremost hero recalls Washington's life as a soldier, statesman, and virtuous private citizen.



A Carrara marble bust of the Marquis de Lafayette by Houdon is also on display in the Rotunda. During the Revolutionary War, the French citizen Lafayette was a Major General in the service of the United States and served as Commander in Chief of the Army of the United States in Virginia. In 1784, the Virginia General Assembly, expressing gratitude for Lafayette's assistance, commissioned a bust from life by Houdon to be presented to the City of Paris. The Assembly also resolved that Houdon should make a second bust to be sent to the Commonwealth for display at the seat of government with the proposed statue of Washington. Virginia's bust of Lafayette arrived at the Capitol in 1789.

In the niches along the walls of the Rotunda are busts of the other Virginia-born presidents who succeeded Washington: Thomas Jefferson, James Madison, James Monroe, William Henry Harrison, John Tyler, Zachary Taylor, and Woodrow Wilson. Jefferson's bust, sculpted by Attilio Piccirilli and based on a bust by Houdon, was the gift of a group of French citizens in 1931; the other busts were gifts from Virginians in the same year. Piccirilli also sculpted the bust of James Monroe. The busts of James Madison and of Zachary Taylor are the work of Frederick William Sievers; the bust of William Henry Harrison is by Chester Beach; the bust of John Tyler is by Charles Keck; and the bust of Woodrow Wilson is by Harriet Frishmuth.

Right: *Virginia's greatest treasure and one of the world's finest portrait sculptures, Houdon's life-sized statue of George Washington is the only full-length sculpture for which the Revolutionary War hero and first President posed.*

Left: *By the late nineteenth century, the gallery of the Rotunda was a museum that included such objects as the stove and original Speaker's chair from the House of Burgesses in Williamsburg, as well as portraits of prominent Virginians. Today, portraits of Virginia's most recent Governors are displayed here.*

The Old Hall of the House of Delegates

The Old Hall of the House of Delegates is located off the Rotunda in the north end of the building. At 76 feet in width, it is the largest room in Jefferson's Capitol. A dramatic coved ceiling, projecting cornices and carved interior woodwork reflect the Capitol's Roman Classicism. Delegates assembled here in rows of seats arranged around the Speaker's chair. As there was no other large meeting hall in the area, the room was also used for community events and for church services in its early years, with Episcopal and Presbyterian congregations meeting on alternate Sundays.

The Virginia House of Delegates met in the Old Hall regularly from 1788 until 1904. Now a museum, it has been the scene of many historic events. In December 1791, the House voted here to ratify the proposed U.S. Bill of Rights. Later that month the Virginia Senate concurred, and the Bill of Rights was nationally adopted as the first ten amendments to the U.S. Constitution. In 1807, Aaron Burr was acquitted of treason in this room in a Federal Circuit Court trial presided over by John Marshall, Chief Justice of the United States. The convention that drafted the Virginia Constitution of 1830 also met here, as did the constitutional conventions of 1850-51, 1867-68, and 1901-02. The Virginia Secession Convention of 1861 met here during part of its first session. It was also a meeting place for the Provisional Confederate Congress in the first summer of the Civil War. The Old Hall was restored in 1929 to resemble its mid-nineteenth century appearance.

Old Hall of the House of Delegates

The Old Hall is filled with statuary and historical objects. A full-length marble statue of Henry Clay, sculpted by Joel Tanner Hart in 1859, is located here. Marble and bronze busts representing other great Virginians, including Revolutionary-era statesmen George Mason, Richard Henry Lee, Patrick Henry, and George Wythe, can also be found in the Old Hall. Confederate generals depicted include Thomas "Stonewall" Jackson, J.E.B. Stuart, Joseph E. Johnston, and Fitzhugh Lee. Other busts in this room include oceanographer Matthew Fontaine Maury, "Pathfinder of the Seas;" Cyrus McCormick, inventor of the grain reaper; John Marshall, fourth Chief Justice of the United States; and Sam Houston, first President of the Republic of Texas. Niches on either side of the entrance contain marble busts of two non-Virginians: Jefferson Davis, President of the Confederacy, and Alexander H. Stephens, his Vice President. Most striking of all the statuary in this room is the full-length bronze likeness of General Robert E. Lee, created by Rudulph Evans in 1931. The statue was erected where Lee stood on April 23, 1861, when at the age of 54 he accepted command of the military forces of the Commonwealth of Virginia.

On display in the Old Hall is a silver mace with 24-karat gold wash, made in England in 1938. It was presented to the Virginia House of Delegates in 1974 by the Jamestown Foundation. Today a mace can also be found in the United States House of Representatives, where it symbolizes, as it does here, the authority of government. During sessions, the General Assembly's mace is carried by the Sergeant at Arms to the current House Chamber and placed in a cradle in front of the Clerk's podium.

Above: *This bronze statue of Robert E. Lee is said to stand on the spot in the Old Hall where Lee accepted command of the military forces of Virginia in April 1861.*

Left: *Ceremonial Mace, the House of Delegates. The mace's importance lies in its symbolism, derived from English tradition. Centuries ago, bodyguards carried clubs in order to protect important rulers. Gradually, other, more efficient weapons replaced the club, and the mace form became more ornamental in purpose. Virginia's House of Delegates has used a ceremonial mace since 1700. Today's mace is a symbol of the important political and legal traditions shared by the Commonwealth of Virginia and Great Britain.*

The Old Senate Chamber

Thomas Jefferson originally planned this area, on the main floor, as the General Courtroom for the Commonwealth of Virginia. After serving as a courtroom for half a century, the chamber was converted in the early 1840s for use by the Senate of Virginia, which previously met in a smaller room on the third floor. In late 1861, the room was enlarged and remodeled as "the Hall of Congress" for the Confederate House of Representatives, which met here from 1862 until 1865. Former U.S. President John Tyler and Confederate General Thomas "Stonewall" Jackson each lay in state here after their deaths during the Civil War. After the war, the room was reclaimed by the Virginia Senate, which held its last session here in 1904. The Old Senate Chamber is now used for committee meetings and press conferences.

Paintings depicting two of the most important events in the history of the Commonwealth and of the nation are displayed in the Old Senate Chamber. *The Arrival of the First Permanent English Settlers off Jamestown Island, May 13, 1607*, painted in 1949 by Griffith Baily Coale, depicts the establishment of the first permanent English settlement in America. It shows three ships, the Susan Constant, the Godspeed, and the Discovery, ascending the James River. *Storming of a British Redoubt at Yorktown by American Troops* depicts the October 14, 1781, night attack which caused the surrender of British and Hessian troops in the last battle of the Revolutionary War. This victory in Virginia secured national independence. The large canvas was painted in 1840 by French artist Eugène Louis Lami and was presented as a gift to Virginia by art collector William Corcoran in 1878.

Above: *Now used periodically for meetings, the Old Senate Chamber also displays paintings. Shown here are depictions of the last battle of the Revolutionary War at Yorktown in 1781 and of the three ships that brought the first permanent English settlers to Virginia in 1607.*

Right: *Seal of the Senate of Virginia. The College of Arms in London designed the Senate of Virginia Seal. The center shield is flanked by the state bird, a cardinal with wings outspread, and a dragon, part of the arms of the sovereigns of England. Above the shield is a helmet with a wreath of the state flower, the Dogwood, supporting a female figure representing Queen Elizabeth I, the "Virgin Queen" for whom Virginia is named. The ribbon at the base of the shield contains the motto of the Senate: "Floreat Senatus Virginiae"-- "May the Senate of Virginia flourish."*

The East and West Wings

Between 1904 and 1906, the Capitol was enlarged with the addition of two matching Neo-Classical wings designed by Norfolk architect John Kevan Peebles. Since that time, the Senate has met in a formal chamber in the west wing. There are 40 state senators who are elected for four-year terms. The Lieutenant Governor is the President and presiding officer of the Senate. The Senate elects a senior member as President pro tempore, as well as a Clerk, who each serve a four-year term. Portraits of former Lieutenant Governors are hung on the walls of the chamber. The Senators sit at individual desks arranged in a semi-circle around a central podium. Over the podium is the marble "Signers Tablet" commemorating the seven Virginians who signed the Declaration of Independence.

The House of Delegates has met in the east wing since 1906. The House is composed of 100 Delegates who are elected every two years. The Speaker and the Clerk of the House are elected by the membership, each for a two-year term. Desks for the House members fill the room, flanking three sides of the Speaker's podium. Portraits of the two most recent Speakers hang on each side of the podium. A marble bas-relief portrait of Lila Meade Valentine, a prominent educational reformer and suffragette, is displayed on the south wall. On the north wall is a marble tablet honoring the Virginia Declaration of Rights, which was drafted by George Mason in 1776.

Annual sessions of the General Assembly are held in even-numbered years for 60 days and in odd-numbered years for 30 days. The 30-day session is traditionally extended to 46 days. Early in every session the entire Assembly meets in the House Chamber where the Governor delivers his State of the Commonwealth message.

The Senate Chamber

The House of Delegates Chamber

Home to Virginia's governors and their families since 1813, the Executive Mansion has also welcomed such guests as the Marquis de Lafayette, Theodore Roosevelt, Winston Churchill, and Lady Margaret Thatcher.

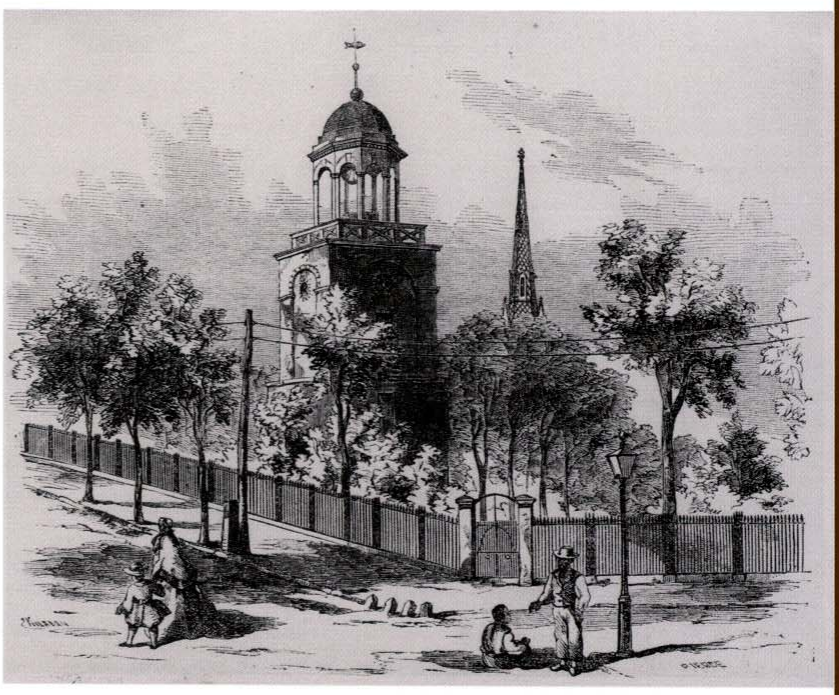
During its 1999 renovation, the Mansion's heating, cooling, and fire safety systems were cleverly concealed from view.

The Executive Mansion

The Executive Mansion is located just east of the Capitol within the grounds of Capitol Square. Designed by Boston architect Alexander Parris, the Federal-style mansion has been the official residence of the Governor of Virginia and his family since its completion in March 1813. It is the nation's oldest Governor's residence in continuous use. The citizens of Virginia elect a new Governor every four years. The main floor of the Executive Mansion is regularly open for public tours.

Capitol Square

The public area surrounding the Capitol was originally a weed-filled, virtually treeless open square with informal lanes and footpaths. In 1816, the General Assembly hired French architect and landscape gardener Maximilian Godefroy to lay out a formal park. Two years later, the newly landscaped grounds were enclosed by a cast-iron and wrought-iron fence, and this area eventually came to be called Capitol Square. Almost 200 years later, this fence still surrounds the square. In 1850, John Notman, a native of Edinburgh, Scotland, who practiced architecture and landscape gardening in Philadelphia, developed a plan of meandering walkways and native trees and shrubs that gave Capitol Square much of the appeal it retains today. Notman channeled the springs in the Square to two fountains he placed near its southeast and southwest corners. These fountains still exist, but are now fed by the municipal water supply.



A late nineteenth century sketch of the Bell Tower.

Along the lower western edge of Capitol Square is the brick Bell Tower. It was begun in 1824 as headquarters for the Virginia Public Guard, a military predecessor to the present-day Virginia Capitol Police. The bell atop the Bell Tower is tolled each day to call the General Assembly into session. Today, the Bell Tower serves as a destination for visitors seeking tourist information and as the office for the Capitol Square Preservation Council.

The Neo-Classical Finance Building, begun in 1893 as the Commonwealth's first library building, stands on the Square to the east of the Capitol. A second state library building, completed in 1940, stands north of the Governor's Mansion; it is being renovated as offices for the Executive branch. In the southeast corner of the Square is the 12-story Washington Building, an imposing office structure dedicated on February 22, 1924. Beyond the Square are other state office buildings named for Virginia-born U.S. presidents Jefferson, Madison, Monroe, and Tyler. Facing Capitol Square on its north side are Old City Hall, a granite 1894 Gothic Revival masterpiece, and the General Assembly Building, which incorporates a 1930 Beaux-Arts building.

Near the Bell Tower is a bronze statue of Edgar Allan Poe, who grew up in Richmond and returned years later to edit *The Southern Literary Messenger* nearby. On the north grounds of the Capitol are bronze statues of Major General Thomas "Stonewall" Jackson; Dr. Hunter Holmes McGuire, a respected Southern surgeon; William "Extra Billy" Smith, Governor of Virginia and Confederate Brigadier General; and Harry F. Byrd, Sr., Governor of Virginia and former U.S. Senator.

A large equestrian monument of General George Washington is located just northwest of the Capitol at the main entrance to the Square. Virginia's Washington Monument was conceived in the early nineteenth century to honor Washington and to glorify Virginia's contributions to our nation's independence. Virginia's role in the Revolution is represented by bronze statues of six native sons, which surround the mounted figure of General Washington at the top of the granite monument. Smaller allegorical figures below the six standing statues are inscribed with themes reflecting each patriot's contribution: Andrew Lewis, Colonial Times; Patrick Henry, Revolution; George Mason, Bill of Rights; Thomas Jefferson, Independence; Thomas Nelson, Finance; and John Marshall, Justice.

American sculptor Thomas Crawford designed the Washington Monument and completed the statues of Washington, Jefferson, and Henry. The cornerstone was laid in 1850 on Washington's Birthday, February 22, and the monument was unveiled exactly eight years later. Crawford died in 1857 before completing the monument. His American colleague, Randolph Rogers, executed the statues of Mason, Marshall, Nelson, and Lewis, as well as the allegorical figures. The last figure was put into place in 1869.

For over two hundred years the historic grounds and buildings of Capitol Square have served the citizens of the Commonwealth of Virginia and visitors alike. Capitol Square has been a lively backdrop for legislation, inaugurations, commemorations, and protests, but it has also provided a tranquil setting for people visiting and working daily at the Commonwealth's seat of government.

Designed by Thomas Crawford, Virginia's Washington Monument on Capitol Square pays tribute to the Commonwealth's leaders and the events of the Revolutionary War.

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Internet Resources:

The Virginia General Assembly: http://legis.state.va.us

The Governor of Virginia: www.governor.virginia.gov

Capitol Tours
http://dls.state.va.us/capitoltours.htm

The Capitol Square Preservation Council:
www.capitolsquarevirginia.state.va.us

The Library of Virginia: www.lva.lib.va.us

The Virginia Capitol Preservation Foundation:
www.virginiacapitol.gov

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All other photos: The Library of Virginia.

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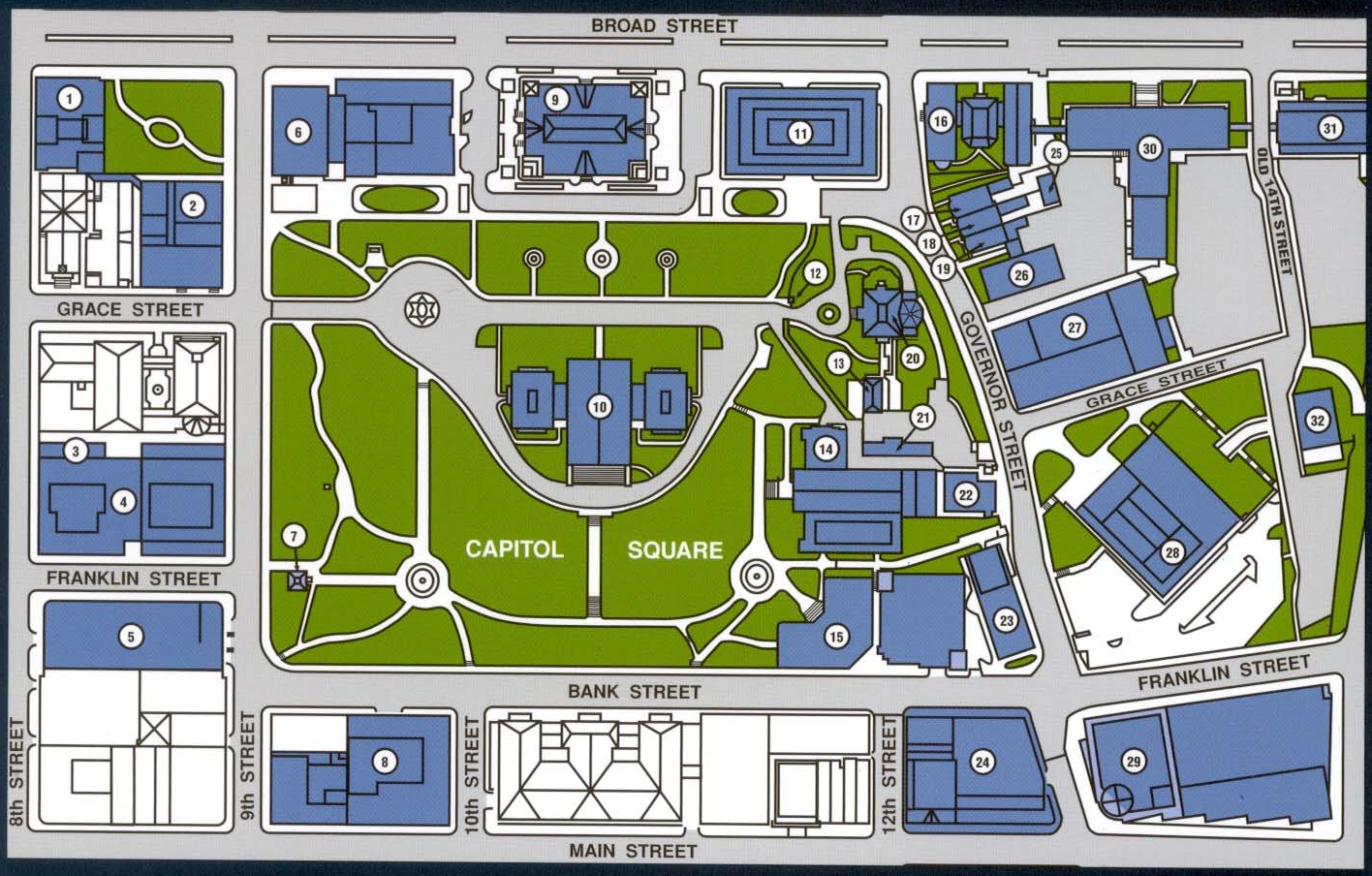
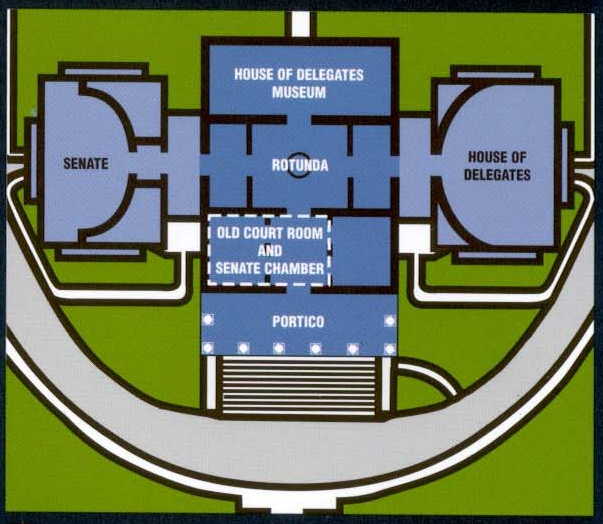
Capitol Guided Tours:
(804) 698-1788
(804) 698-1906 Fax

Executive Mansion Tours:
(804) 371-8687



Capitol Area Map

1 Eighth Street Office Building
2 Ninth Street Office Building
3 Rose and Lafoon Building
4 Supreme Court Building
5 VRS Deck
6 General Assembly Building
7 Bell Tower
8 Pocahontas Building
9 Old City Hall (Rental Property)
10 State Capitol Building
11 Executive Office Building
12 Governor's Mansion Guardhouse
13 Governor's Mansion Cottage
14 Finance Building
15 Washington Building
16 Memorial Hospital Building (VDOT)
17 223 Governor Street (Morson Row)
18 221 Governor Street (Morson Row)
19 219 Governor Street (Morson Row)
20 Governor's Mansion
21 Governor's Mansion Carriage House
22 Shop Building
23 Jefferson Building
24 VRS Building
25 Garage for 223 Governor Street
26 Aluminum Building
27 Zincke Building
28 Madison Building
29 Tyler Building
30 Department of Transportation Building
31 Department of Transportation Annex
32 Ferguson Building



■ Original Portion of the Capitol