



THE CAPITOL BUILDING

Introduction

The Capitol is among the most architecturally impressive and symbolically important buildings in the world. The Senate and the House of Representatives have met here for more than two centuries. Begun in 1793, the Capitol has been built, burnt, rebuilt, extended, and restored; today, it stands as a monument not only to its builders but also to the American people and their government. As George Washington said, public buildings in the Capitol city “in size, form, and elegance, should look beyond the present day.”¹

This activity features images of the U.S. Capitol building—architectural plans and artistic renderings from its original design and subsequent expansion. Examining these images, students engage in class discussion and individual reflection, considering how a building itself might serve as a symbol and monument. Then, they draft images that capture their own interpretation of how a Capitol building should look. While intended for 8th grade students, the lesson can be adapted for other grade levels.

¹ The Writings of George Washington from the Original Manuscript Sources, 1745–1799. John C. Fitzpatrick, Editor., Philadelphia, March 8, 1792.



Estimated Time

One to two class sessions

National Standards

National Standards for Civics and Government Content Standards, grades 5–8

II—What are the Foundations of the American Political System (D.1)

United States History National Standards

United States Era 3—Revolution and the New Nation

National Standards for Visual Arts

1—Understanding and applying media, techniques, processes

4—Understanding the visual arts in relation to history and culture

Common Core State Standards for English Language Arts, grade 8

Writing 1

Speaking and Listening 1, 2

Common Core State Standards for Literacy in History/Social Studies, grade 8

Reading 7

Learning Skills

Reading, group discussion, reflective writing, presentation, chronological thinking, vocabulary enrichment

Essential Question

What should a Capitol building look like? How does the U.S. Capitol building serve as a symbol of the U.S. government?



Documents and Worksheets

Images from original design competition can be found at this website:

<http://www.visitthecapitol.gov/exhibition-hall/timeline?c=75&y=66>

- Design competition submission, not chosen: *An Elevation for a Capitol*, by James Diamond, 1792
- Design competition submission, not chosen: *Respective View of the Federal House*, by Andrew Mayfield Carshore, 1792
- Design competition submission, not chosen: *No. 2 of Aml. Dobie inv& del For a Capitol to be built in the City of Washington*, by Samuel Dobie, ink and ink washes on paper, 1792
- *Proposed design for the U.S. Capitol, west elevation*, by Dr. William Thornton, ca 1793–1800
- *Approved Design for the United States Capitol*, by Dr. William Thornton, 1793

Images of the Capitol in the 1830's and of a proposed extension can be found at this website:

<http://www.visitthecapitol.gov/exhibition-hall/timeline?c=75&y=67>

- *East front of the Capitol*, by Alexander Jackson Davis, cs. 1832–34
- *Proposed Design for the Capitol Extension*, by Thomas U. Walter, 1850 Images

Image of Thomas U. Walter's revised design of the dome (*Revised Design for Dome of U.S. Capitol*, by Thomas U. Walter, 1859) is located at this website:

<http://www.visitthecapitol.gov/additional-information-images/revised-design-for-dome-us-capitol-thomas-u-walter-1859>

Contemporary images can be found at this website:

<http://www.aoc.gov/capitol-buildings/about-us-capitol>

Secondary source material:

- Historical background information regarding design competition and architectural considerations
- Annotated webography



Suggested Activities

- As a whole class, look at a contemporary image of the Capitol (<http://www.aoc.gov/capitol-buildings/about-us-capitol>). What happens in this building? This important landmark building is the home of the legislative branch of our government, a center for national ceremony and events, a museum and repository of the history of our nation, and a symbol of the United States at home and abroad. Develop a student-generated list of adjectives/phrases that come to mind when looking at the building.
- When George Washington originally commissioned Pierre L'Enfant to plan the city of Washington D.C., L'Enfant created a plan for the city that included a place for the Capitol building on Jenkins Hill that he called “a pedestal waiting for a monument.” As a class, develop a definition for the term “monument.” Do students feel the Capitol building is a monument? If so, a monument to what? How can a building serve as a visual representation, or symbol of our nation? How might it meet George Washington’s call that public buildings in “form, and elegance, should look beyond the present day?” What architectural and design qualities support our interpretation? (Refer to historical background information and annotated webography.)
- Students choose one of 8 images of the Capitol from the design competitions (original design competition in 1792, and expansion competition in 1850). These images, found in the Capitol Visitor Center’s online exhibition <http://www.visitthecapitol.gov/exhibition-hall/timeline?c=75&y=66> and <http://visitthecapitol.gov/exhibition-hall/timeline?c=75&y=67> include explanatory text. Referring to historical background information and annotated webography, students respond through reflective writing and consider: Do you feel this image is a symbol of our nation? Why: what do you see that makes you say that? What architectural and design qualities can you identify? Does this proposed design look like the Capitol today? Why or why not? Does this design remind you of a different building (a specific building or other types of buildings)?
- As a whole class, share findings (or you may choose to group students according to the image they’ve chosen). Are there differences in opinion? Similarities? What general observations or specific references to design or architectural qualities have been made?
- Distribute sketching paper and pencils and ask students, “if you could design a capitol building for the nation *today* what would it look like?” Taking into consideration class discussions, the initial student-generated list of adjectives/phrases and individual image examination, students sketch a design. When designs are complete, students share their artwork and explain why they’ve chosen to use particular symbols and shapes.



Teacher Tip

You may choose to use this activity as a way to explore more deeply architectural design, language and tools (i.e. what are the architectural details employed — type of columns, material, scale.)

Suggested Modifications

Please feel free to use the activities and primary and secondary sources in whatever way will best meet the needs of your students. For example, you might consider partnering students for reading activities, adding a journaling activity or using the images in different ways.

Extended Activity

- Students conduct a survey of members of their school or local community. Develop specific questions in order to collect information about perceptions and understandings about the Capitol building. Do people consider the Capitol building to be a symbol of anything in particular? Are there differing opinions? Once data is gathered, students discuss the variety of responses and share them visually in graphs.
- Students consider the Capitol building in their own state. How does their state building reflect regional history through architectural design? What evidence do they see in the design or architecture to support that argument? Does their state capitol look like our nation's capital or not? Why? Consider what scholar William Allen has written about William Thornton. “He established for all time what the Capitol was to be. Everything that came later had to follow Thornton’s design.” His creation, Allen notes, would also inspire nearly every state capitol erected throughout the 19th century, most notably in North Carolina, Alabama and Mississippi.²
- Students watch the “history of the US Capitol building” video by the Architect of the Capitol and engage in a conversation about the evolution of the building. http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=jmo-A_8HoOM. How has the building changed and grow through time?

² <http://www.smithsonianmag.com/history-archaeology/Capitol-Fellow.html#ixzz2CJzK5Cap>



Historical Background for Teacher-led Discussion

What is the story of the original design competition?

According to the Constitution (Article I, Section 8), the federal government was allowed to establish a permanent home 10 miles square in size. A compromise between Northern and Southern states led in July, 1790 to the passage of the Residence Act and the establishment of the capital city on the Potomac River. Once a location was determined for the capital city, President George Washington appointed commissioners and told them to employ Pierre L'Enfant to create a plan for the city including the location of key federal buildings. L'Enfant decided on what he called Jenkins Hill as the site for the Capitol building, referring to it as “a pedestal waiting for a monument.”³

James Madison, Thomas Jefferson, and the commissioners decided to name the city “Washington” and the territory “Columbia.”

Washington delegated oversight to Jefferson, Secretary of State, as his advisor on national affairs. In 1792, Jefferson announced a design competition for the new Capitol building. None of the entries pleased Washington. But in 1793 he saw the design proposal of William Thornton, and chose it for its “grandeur, simplicity and convenience.” Jefferson, too, liked the Thornton design, referring to it as “simple, noble, beautiful, excellently distributed and moderate in size.”⁴

What did Washington say about the competition entries?

Washington and Jefferson thought that the Capitol should reflect America’s political ideals while at the same time meeting the needs of the legislature. Washington’s original writings on the proposed designs indicate that he took a detailed and careful look at the designs submitted. Transcripts of Washington’s letters regarding the Capitol can be found below:

[http://lcweb2.loc.gov/cgi-bin/query/r?ammem/mgw:@field\(DOCID+@lit\(gw320097\)\)](http://lcweb2.loc.gov/cgi-bin/query/r?ammem/mgw:@field(DOCID+@lit(gw320097)))

[http://lcweb2.loc.gov/cgi-bin/query/r?ammem/mgw:@field\(DOCID+@lit\(gw320238\)\)](http://lcweb2.loc.gov/cgi-bin/query/r?ammem/mgw:@field(DOCID+@lit(gw320238)))

What was so special about William Thornton’s design?

Thornton’s design took into account the purpose of the building (to house both the House and the Senate) and was aesthetically pleasing. His design was inspired by the Pantheon, a classic Roman temple. Architectural historian William Allen writes, “Thornton’s adaptation of the Pantheon linked the new republic to the classical world and to its ideas of civic virtue and self-government... By separating the wings, he also physically expressed the bicameral form of the government”⁵

³ Allen, William, *History of the United States Capitol*, Washington, D.C., U.S. Government Printing Office, 2001, page 8.

⁴ Allen page 19.

⁵ <http://www.smithsonianmag.com/history-archaeology/Capitol-Fellow.html#ixzz2CJzK5Cap>



What is neoclassical architecture?

The Capitol building is an example of neoclassical architecture inspired by classical Greek and Roman architecture. These kinds of buildings may feature a dome, columns, pediments, a crowning statue, many small windows, balustrades (or many small repeating posts like a porch rail) and pilasters (flat columns). They were simple yet grand in nature.

Why refer to Greece and Rome?

The design of the Capitol evokes the ideals that guided the nation's founders as they framed the new republic. Jefferson's "intention was to forge a chain among American's political system, the ancient traditions in which it was rooted, and the building where American laws would be enacted."⁶

What about the Capitol Dome?

The U.S. Capitol has been built, burnt, rebuilt, extended and restored. The Capitol Dome, designed by Charles Bulfinch and completed in 1826, consisted of an interior and exterior shell. The interior shell replicated the proportions found in the Pantheon in Rome, reinforcing the connection between ancient ideals and America.

By 1850, the nation's growth required more room for the legislature to conduct business within the Capitol. Congress approved the use of government money to extend the Capitol, and Thomas U. Walter was named the new Architect of the Capitol. A new cast iron dome was designed by Walter, and engineer Montgomery Meigs provided oversight of its construction. The new dome was designed to be proportional to the connecting corridors and wings on either side of the building. The extensions and dome maintained the neoclassical design of the original building and created a harmonious whole despite having been built in different eras.

The Capitol Dome is seen as a symbol of America throughout the world.

Credits

"My Capitol, Discover! Explore! Art, History, Architecture and Government," U.S. Capitol Visitor Center

http://www.visitthecapitol.gov/aboutthecapitol/evolution_of_the_capitol/index.html

<http://www.visitthecapitol.gov/>

⁶ Scott, Pamela, *Temple of Liberty, Building the Capitol for a New Nation*, Oxford University Press, 1995, page 23.



Annotated Webography

<http://www.visitthecapitol.gov/exhibitions/online/the-capitol-story.html>

The Capitol Visitor Center's online exhibit explores the history of the Capitol building, including information, images and documents related to its art and design. There is a tremendous amount of information about the design competition and the evolution of the Capitol building through time.

<http://www.loc.gov/exhibits/us.capitol/s0.html>

This is the Library of Congress' online exhibition "Temple of Liberty; Building the Capitol for a New Nation (February 24–July 4, 1994). Featured information details the history of the Capitol building including text and images related to the original design, additions and extensions.

<http://www.aoc.gov/capitol-buildings/about-us-capitol-building>

From the Architect of the Capitol, this site outlines the history of the Capitol building including links to images of the building and descriptions of its use.

http://www.senate.gov/reference/reference_item/history_of_the_capitol.htm

Here is a scholarly review of the historian William Allen's book *History of the United States Capitol: A Chronicle of Design* that offers some background information about the history of the Capitol.

<http://www.nps.gov/nr/travel/wash/dc76.htm>

The National Park Service offers the following overview of the history of Washington D.C., the Capitol building and other federal buildings.

<http://www.loc.gov/rr/print/adecenter/essays/B-Thornton.html>

From the Library of Congress' website, a biographical overview of William Thornton, winner of the original design for the Capitol.

http://artandhistory.house.gov/art_artifacts/slave_labor_reportl.pdf

This academic report, prepared by historian William Allen for Office of the Architect of the Capitol, explores the use of slave labor to construct the original Capitol building.

<http://www.aoc.gov/capitol-hill/architecture-elements/corinthian-columns>

Here is specific information about the Corinthian columns used in the Capitol building and reference to other federal buildings that employ similar architectural styles. From this site, you can navigate to information about other kinds of columns used at the Capitol building as well as materials and styles referenced in its architecture and design.