



Building America's Main Seats of Power: The Construction History of the White House and U.S. Capitol

Charles River Editors

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*Includes pictures *Includes accounts of the construction of both buildings during the 19th century *Includes bibliographies for further reading *Includes a table of contents “The cornerstone was laid by Washington in 1793; the terrace was finished nearly a hundred years later, in 1891; and yet the Capitol will never be complete while the nation lasts. The impress of each succeeding generation will be found upon its walls, marking the intellectual, artistic and governmental advancement of the age. The great pile is national, American, human. On its walls is written the nation's history. Its corridors resound to the footsteps of her living heroes and sages; its every stone echoes the departed voices of her greatest dead.” – George Hazelton For over two centuries, the capital of America has been located in Washington, D.C., and among all the iconic landmarks and monuments associated with the city, nothing is as conspicuous as the Capitol, the magnificent building that houses Congress and sits on Capitol Hill at the epicenter of the city. At the same time, even though the Capitol is now one of the most recognizable buildings in the world, the image everyone is familiar with took nearly a century to achieve, indicative of its turbulent history. In fact, the Capitol was partially burned by the British during the War of 1812, and its now famous dome was still under construction while the nation fought itself during the Civil War. Moreover, it's easy to forget that the expansion of the country resulted in the addition of new Congressmen, requiring the expansion of the Capitol as the seat of the legislative branch. The history of the Capitol also serves as a reminder that the building, like the nation, both shapes and is shaped by history. There are still singed walls from the War of 1812 under the marble façade, and microscopic examination could no doubt find cracks from the vibration of distant cannon fire during the Civil War. Of course, there is no way to calculate the wear and tear caused by the millions of feet that trudge through the Capitol's sacred halls each year, but through it all, the Capitol has managed to endure, just like the nation it represents. Few things in the nation's capital provide symbolism quite like the White House, the primary residence and office of the president. The instantly recognizable exterior and its location have ensured that the White House is associated as the main seat of power in the world's most powerful country. At the same time, the majesty of the White House and its tranquil setting belie its rather chaotic history, which includes being burned down by the British during the War of 1812, suffering damage during wild inaugural balls, and undergoing countless renovations. As Brian Kelly, author of *Best Little Stories from the White House: More Than 100 True Stories*, put it, “You could almost argue, in fact, that it wasn't finished, truly, until yesterday. And...who knows what they may do to it tomorrow, as it has undergone so many changes, additions, improvements, and even subtractions in its two-hundred-year history. The fact is, the White House we see today is not the White House of yore.” Just as the interior has changed, the use of the White House has also changed considerably over time. While the White House was always intended to serve as the president's home and a place to receive dignitaries, in the early 19th century, the White House was open to the public, to the extent that people could simply call on the president. Perhaps most notably, the White House has historically been open to public tours, albeit with exceptions made based on security issues, wars, and budget issues. The availability of the public to tour the White House is a strong reminder that while it may house the president during his term, the place ultimately belongs to the people.

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