



U.S. CAPITOL VISITOR CENTER

TEACHER LESSON PLAN

GRADE LEVEL: 6 – 8

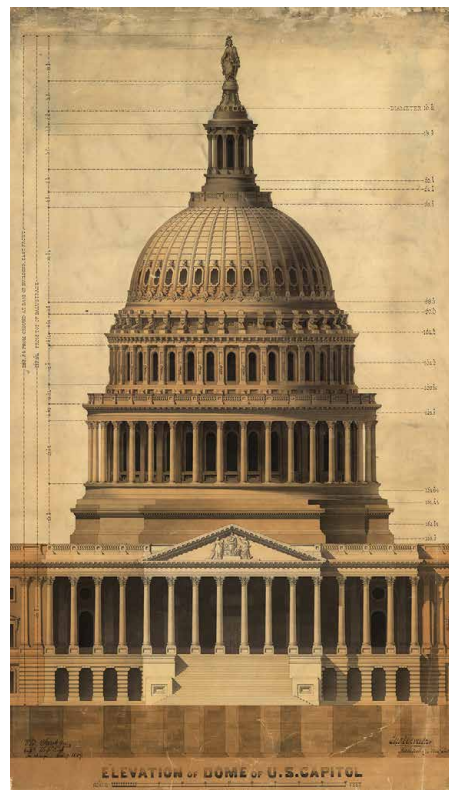
THE CAPITOL: ARCHITECTURE *and* MEANING

Introduction

The U.S. Capitol is an architectural icon of Washington, D.C. and the United States. The Senate and the House of Representatives have met here for more than two centuries. After Congress selected the site of the capital city, George Washington, Thomas Jefferson, and commissioners of the District of Columbia held a competition to select the best design for a new Capitol building.

The published guidelines of the competition stipulated the architectural requirements for the building, such as the number of rooms and construction materials. However, architectural style and symbolic meaning were not outlined, so competitors proposed various plans to convey America's new political structure through architecture. Construction began in 1793. Since then, the Capitol has since been built, burned, rebuilt, extended and restored. Today, it stands as a monument not only to its builders, but also to the American people and our enduring democratic form of government.

This activity invites students to consider how a building may serve as a symbolic monument, as well as a functional space. Students will examine four original design submissions for the Capitol, engage in group discussion and propose their own design ideas.





Estimated Time

One to two class sessions

National Learning Standards

Civics:

NSS-C.5-8.1 Civic Life, Politics and Government

NSS-C.5-8.3 Principles of Democracy

U.S. History:

NSS-USH.5-12.3 Revolution and the New Nation (1754 – 1820s)

Visual Arts:

NA-VA.5-8.1 Understanding and Applying Media, Techniques, and Processes

NA-VA.5-8.4 Understanding the Visual Arts in Relation to History and Cultures

Learning Skills

Group discussion, reflective writing, primary source analysis, presentation, chronological thinking, and vocabulary enrichment

Essential Question

- How does architecture give meaning to a space?

Additional Questions

- In what ways did the proposed designs symbolize the ideals of the new nation?
- Are there buildings where you live that incorporate symbolic elements in the architecture? Where are they and what symbolic elements are featured?

Documents and Worksheets

Primary Source Material

- Images of architectural design proposals for the Capitol
- Excerpts of letters from Thomas Jefferson and George Washington

Secondary Source Material

- Talking points for teacher-led discussion
- Information about the 1792 design competition
- Worksheet for student analysis
- Annotated Online Resources



Suggested Activity

- As a class, discuss the purpose of the Capitol.
 1. Who meets here and why?
 2. This important landmark is the home of the legislative branch of our government. It is where laws are made.
 3. It is where national ceremonies and events are held, and it serves as a symbol of the United States at home and abroad.
- Pierre L'Enfant, who designed the new capital city, called the site for the Capitol “a pedestal waiting for a monument.” As a class, create a mind map based on the word “monument.” What does “monument” make you think of? What is the purpose of monuments?
- Ask students to imagine that they are commissioners of the District of Columbia in the 1792.
 1. Divide the class into small groups. Have each group review the letter excerpts and design proposals included in this packet.
 2. Students should assess each proposal based on the requirements outlined in the competition announcement and their personal tastes. Write responses on the worksheet.
- Invite students to share the proposal each group selected.
 1. Discuss the differences and similarities in opinions amongst the class. What references to design or architectural qualities did the students make?
 2. Class time permitting, share which plan was ultimately chosen (William Thornton’s design) and how the building changed over time.

Extended Activities

- As a class, watch the “History of the U.S. Capitol Building” video on the Architect of the Capitol website and discuss the evolution of the building. How has the Capitol changed over time? https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=jmo-A_8HoOM
- Ask students to consider the Capitol building in their own state. Through discussion or writing prompts, have students reflect on the following questions: How does their Capitol building reflect regional history through architectural design? What evidence do they see in the design or architecture to support the argument? Does their state Capitol share similar architectural elements with the U.S. Capitol?



Historical Background for Teacher-Led Discussion

What is the story of the original design competition?

Article I, Section 8, Clause 17 of the Constitution granted the federal government permission to establish and exercise exclusive control over the nation's capital in a new permanent federal district. A compromise between northern and southern states led to the passage of the Residence Act in July 1790 and the establishment of the capital city on the Potomac River. Once the city location was determined, President George Washington appointed commissioners and Pierre L'Enfant to create a plan for it, including the location of key federal buildings. L'Enfant selected a site he called Jenkins Hill for building the Capitol, noting that it was a "pedestal waiting for a monument."

James Madison, Thomas Jefferson and the commissioners named the city Washington and the territory Columbia. President Washington delegated oversight of the city to Jefferson, his secretary of state and advisor on national affairs.

Washington and Jefferson thought the Capitol should reflect America's political ideals while at the same time meeting the working needs of the legislative branch. In 1792, Jefferson announced a design competition for the new Capitol. None of the initial entries pleased Washington, Jefferson or the District of Columbia commissioners. Then in 1793, a proposal arrived late from Dr. William Thornton. Washington praised the plan for its "grandeur, simplicity, and convenience." Jefferson, too, liked the Thornton design, calling it "simple, noble, beautiful, excellently distributed and moderate in size."

What was special about William Thornton's design?

Thornton's aesthetically pleasing design reflected the purpose of the building - to house both the House of Representatives and the Senate. His design was inspired by the Pantheon, a classic Roman temple. Architectural historian William Allen wrote, "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 government."

How did neoclassical architecture influence the design of the Capitol?

The neoclassical Capitol was inspired by classical Greek and Roman architecture. Neoclassical 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). America's founders idealized ancient Greece and Rome for their contributions to democratic and republican forms of government. Thus, the design of the Capitol evokes the historic precedents and associated ideals that guided the nation's founders as they framed the new republic.



What about the Capitol Dome?

William Thornton's design for the dome was selected in 1793, and he received credit as the first Architect of the Capitol. The second Architect of the Capitol, Benjamin Henry Latrobe, altered Thornton's design by adding an octagonal drum to separate the base of the dome from the central pediment. Thornton's design would not be fully realized until Charles Bulfinch, third Architect of the Capitol, altered the exterior profile of the plans further by increasing the height of the dome. The Bulfinch Dome, consisting of an interior and exterior shell, was completed in 1826. The interior shell replicated the proportions found in the Pantheon in Rome, reinforcing the connection between ancient ideals and the United States.

By 1850, the nation's westward growth established new states and with them, more legislators. Larger chambers for the House of Representatives and the Senate were needed to provide additional space to work within the Capitol. Congress appropriated funds to expand the Capitol and named Thomas U. Walter the fourth Architect of the Capitol. Walter designed a new cast iron dome which was completed in 1866. The dome maintains the original neoclassical design despite being built in different eras. Today, the Capitol Dome is a symbol of the United States throughout the world.

Annotated Online Resources

<https://www.aoc.gov/explore-capitol-campus/buildings-grounds/capitol-building/history>

Includes a detailed history of the construction of the Capitol.

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

Here is specific information about the Corinthian columns used in the Capitol 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 as well as materials and styles referenced in its architecture and design.

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Os1dJkfl7ZU>

A visual timeline of the growth of Capitol Hill.

<https://www.loc.gov/exhibits/uscapitol/s2.html>

An online exhibition, "Temple of Liberty: Building the Capitol for a New Nation," presented by the Library of Congress. The website features information about the 1792 competition and primary sources about the Capitol design.

<https://founders.archives.gov/>

Online database with more than 185,000 searchable and fully annotated documents from the Founding Fathers Paper projects. Excerpts of correspondence of Jefferson and Washington retrieved from this site.



The Capitol: Architecture and Meaning

Congratulations, commissioners! You have the opportunity to review proposals for the design of a new Capitol. First, read the primary source documents and answer the questions below. Then, review the design submissions and select a final design.



Of a lot in the city, to be designated by impartial judges, and \$500, or a medal of that value, at the option of the party, will be given by the Commissioners of Federal Buildings to persons who, before the 15th day of July, 1792, shall produce them the most approved plan, if adopted by them, for a Capitol to be erected in the city, and \$250 or a medal for the plan deemed next in merit to the one they shall adopt; the building to be of brick and to contain the following compartments to wit:

- A conference room (to contain 300 persons)
- A room for Representatives (to contain 300 persons)
- A lobby or antechamber to the latter.
- A Senate room of 1,200 square feet of area
- An antechamber and lobby to the latter.
- Twelve rooms of 600 square feet area each for committee rooms and clerks to be of half the elevation of the former.

Drawings will be expected of the ground plats, elevations of each front, and sections through the building in such directions as may be necessary to explain the material, structure, and an estimate of the cubic feet of the brick work composing the whole mass of the wall.

*THOS. JOHNSON, DD. STUART, DANL. CARROLL, Commissioners.
MARCH 14, 1792*

What is the total number of rooms required in the new building plan?

What building materials does the announcement require to be used?

Does the announcement list any specific design elements or decorations?



Read what George Washington and Thomas Jefferson had to say before reviewing the submissions.

Jefferson

"Pray get me by some means or other a compleat set of Piranesi's drawings of the Pantheon...I wish to render them useful in the public buildings now to be begun at Georgetown."

Jefferson to William Short, March 16, 1791

"Whenever it is proposed to prepare plans for the Capitol, I should prefer the adoption of some one of the models of antiquity which have had the approbation of thousands of years..."

Jefferson to Pierre L'Enfant,
April 10, 1791

Washington

"The buildings, especially the Capitol, ought to be upon a scale far superior to any thing in this Country."

Washington's remarks on the agenda for a meeting with the Federal Commissioners designing DC, March 1792

"The Grandeur, Simplicity and Beauty of the exterior—the propriety with which the apartments are distributed—and the economy in the mass of the whole structure, will, I doubt not, give it a preference, in your eyes, as it has done in mine"

Washington Letter to the DC Commissioners

"The Dome, which is suggested as an addition to the center of the edifice, would, in my opinion, give beauty & grandeur..."

Washington to the D.C. commissioners, dated July 23, 1792

What design elements were important to Jefferson and Washington, according to their correspondence?

In addition to the requirements above, what design elements do you think are important to include in the new Capitol?



Competition Review Worksheet

Name: _____

Fellow Commissioners Names: _____

Submissions are in! Each architect sent an exterior drawing and plan for the first floor of the new Capitol. Review the proposals, taking the information from the primary sources into consideration. Answer the review questions and select one design.

How would you describe the overall design?	
James Diamond Plan	
Stephen Hallet Plan	
Samuel Doby Plan	
William Thornton Plan	
What specific design elements are included?	
James Diamond Plan	
Stephen Hallet Plan	
Samuel Doby Plan	
William Thornton Plan	



In what ways does the proposal meet or not meet the requirements of the competition?

James Diamond Plan

Stephen Hallet Plan

Samuel Doby Plan

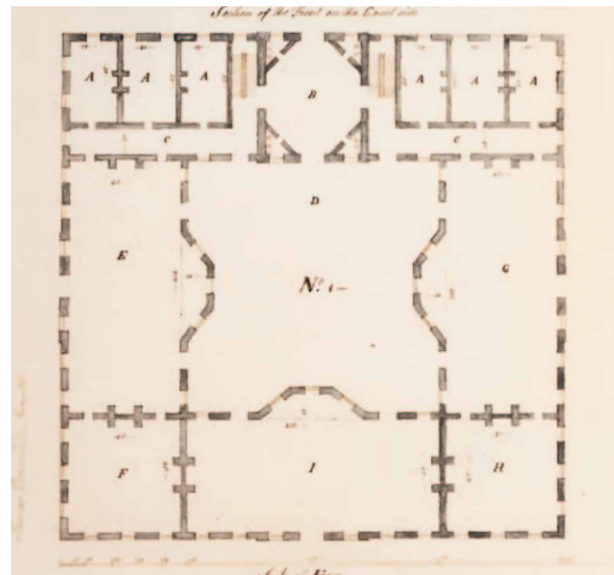
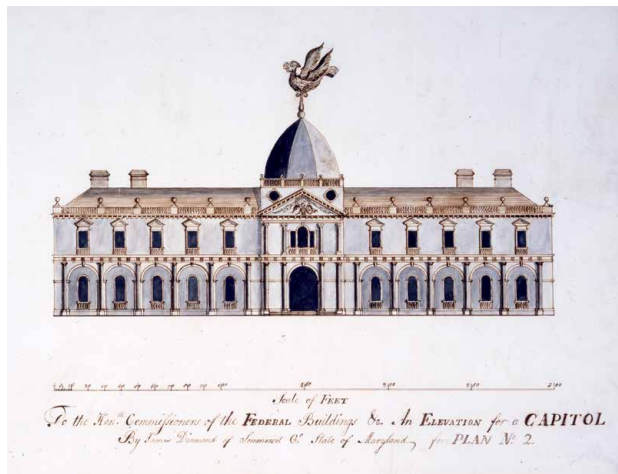
William Thornton Plan

Discuss with your fellow commissioners and select the plan that you think best fits the needs for a new Capitol. What's your final decision?

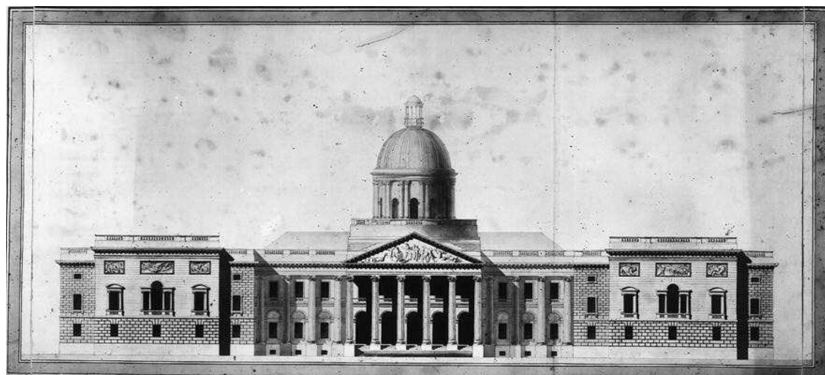
Are there any design elements you think should be added to the winning submission before construction begins? If so, describe or draw your idea below.



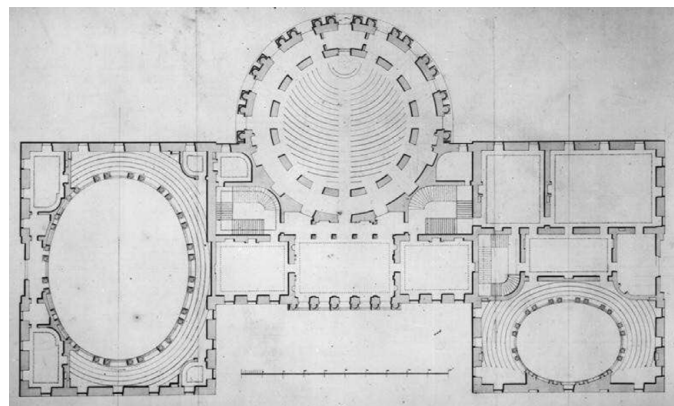
James Diamond Plan



Stephen Hallet Plan

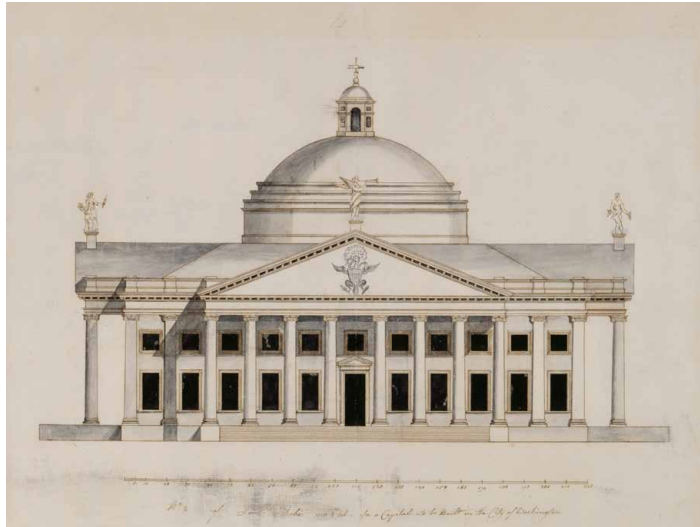


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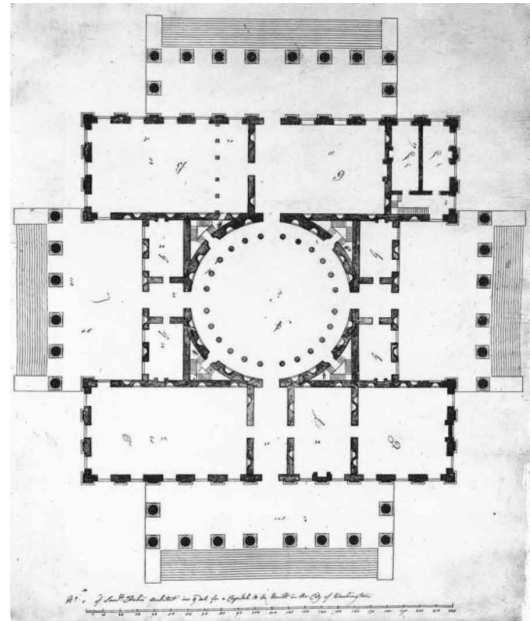




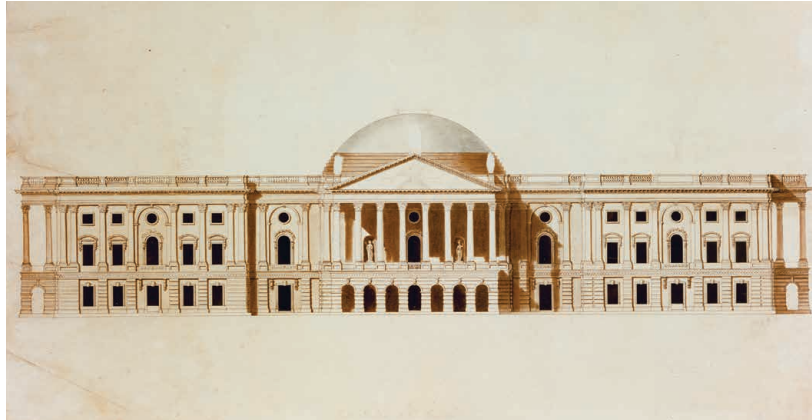
Samuel Doby Plan



Courtesy of the Maryland Historical Society



William Thornton Plan



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