

Capitol, Reconstructed
Williamsburg
James City County
Virginia

HABS No. VA 365

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WRITTEN HISTORIC AND DESCRIPTIVE DATA
District of Virginia

Historic American Buildings Survey

Prepared at Washington Office

THE CAPITOL
Williamsburg, James City County, Virginia

Owner: Williamsburg Restoration

Date of erection: Original building 1701, burned 1747; rebuilt 1753;
burned 1832; rebuilt 1931-33

Builder: Original, Henry Cary; 1751-53, John Blair

Present condition: Good, rebuilt

Description:

Built at the turn of an architectural style as well as of a century, the Capitol was an unusually interesting building. As rebuilt, the form adheres to all the evidence, structural and documentary, that was available: principally the original specification and subsequent modifications in Hening's Statutes at Large, the Bodleian plate, which showed a view from the north, and Michael's and Latrobe's sketches. The building is of brick, laid in Flemish bond (its use was an assumption), two full stories high with high hipped roofs. In plan it is H-shaped, formed of two separate buildings joined by an open gallery above which is a room which forms a connection between the upper stories of the east and west buildings. Directly over this is a two-story cupola. At the south end both buildings have semi-circular apses. The line of these was found in the soil, but all brickwork above the mortar bed had been destroyed in 1881, when a small railroad was run over the spot. This road, constructed for the Centennial celebration, followed the length of Duke of Gloucester Street and continued on to Yorktown. The rest of the foundations of the building were fairly complete and stood for a foot or more above the mortar bed. The walls for the connection were gone, however, and only by its point of contact (which was obscure) with the walls of the main building was it established.

The question of the plan of the building is complicated. The shape and size of the main building were ascertained beyond doubt, but there was no way to determine the fenestration or position of the entrance door. This was finally located through Latrobe's sketch of Botetourt's statue, which once stood in the connecting loggia. This showed that the loggia had three arcades, one in the center and one each in the outside walls. The doors to the main buildings centered on the north side of the loggia. This placed the doorways of the east and west facades on center with the flat fronts and not on center with the overall length of the building (including the apses). This created symmetrical elevations, the doors being in the center with two windows on either side and five

above. The apses are two stories as well, with two oval windows and one round window downstairs (see Hening, and Michael's drawing of 1702) with a high conical roof coinciding in height and pitch with the main roof. This treatment of the apses is an assumption, as the specifications referred to them only in plan and Michael's drawing showed them complete only to the second floor. The precedent for the conical roof is in the old Isle of Wight Court House at Smithfield (which is but a story and a half high) but at Edenton, North Carolina, where an apse occurs on the two-story Court House, it is one-story high with a very low pitched roof. The lower windows of the Capitol are arched, as shown on the Bodleian plate, and the upper are square-headed. The glazing is conjectural but is in the style of the period. The doors and paneled arched heads are in accordance with Latrobe's sketch, and the cornice is modillioned in keeping with local precedent. On the roof are gabled dormers, as they appear in the Bodleian plate. The chimneys seen in the plate were additions (see Hening).

The design of the connections, called the "piazzas" in Hening, was projected and perhaps carried out in a form different from that it now has or from that shown on the Bodleian plate or Latrobe's drawing. The original act for the building specified that it should be fifteen feet wide, but evidently, when it was found that the roof would be only half the height of the others, the act was amended to widen the connection and bring the roof to the height of the others. This doubled the width and caused the triple arcade, as the added width was all on the south side. The rows of three arches are clearly seen in the plate and in Latrobe's drawing, but Michael shows the connection closed in, with arched windows on either side of an arched door. His drawing is undependable, as can be seen from the east elevation he drew, but the connection may have been changed or he may have speculated as to its form before it was completed.

The new cupola is designed on the lines of that shown on the plate, three stories high with the Queen's arms painted on it as provided by the Assembly. The form is the same as the engraving, but low surface detail was used to give it architectural character. The oval window on the south side is an assumption.

In plan the two main buildings are divided into a large room to the south and a stair hall and office to the north. The area they both occupy is about twenty-five feet square. This is subdivided from east to west to make the office and stair hall equal. The large west room was the General Court Room and the office was for the clerk. The large east room was given over to the House of Burgesses and the office to its clerk. The second floor was devoted to Committee rooms and offices, and over the General Court Room was the room of the Governor's Council. The present form of the room is conjectural, as it is not known that the apse

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extended this high, or that it repeated at the north end. However, this latter feature allows the small stair to descend to the gallery in the General Court. The arrangement of the lobby to the Council Chamber and to the room over the piazza was deduced from a description by Hugh Jones in his Present State of Virginia, published in London in 1724.

The trim of all the interior woodwork of the Capitol is conjectural in its detail. Yet in some of the rooms, notably the House of Burgesses, the height of the paneled dado and the location of the seats and rails were specified in the act. The Speaker's chair in this room is the original.

It was assumed from the fact that the dado height was not specified in the General Court that the paneling went to the ceiling. The woodwork of the east wing was once specified to be painted "like wainscot" and again "wainscot color." The present brown was the result, but in the writer's opinion the intent was that the woodwork should be painted and grained to simulate oak. Wainscot was the traditional English term for oak, and pine at this period was often so treated. An interesting contemporary example of graining is on the back of the stair-closet door at Holly Hill, Fairhaven, Maryland, though the wood imitated would seem to be olive. The woodwork in the west building was specified to be marbled.

The location of the Capitol on the lot is poor, as a minor front faces the axis of the Duke of Gloucester Street. It seems quite possible that the plans were made in England and, on general principles, the placement on the lot was made with the front to the south, as was usual in Virginia building. It should be remembered that, at the time, the vista of the street was still obscured by various early houses built on its site before it was laid out. Also, it is not sure that originally the College building faced as at present, so that the axis of the Duke of Gloucester Street in 1700 may have seemed less important than it did but a few years later.

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