



The Capitol of the United States is located in Washington, D.C. The white, dome-crowned Capitol is one of the most recognized buildings in the world and stands as the symbol of the U.S. government.

By 1791, the new country of the United States was only fifteen years old—and had not yet built a capital city. That year, President George Washington selected the site for what is now the District of Columbia from land offered by the state of Maryland. Pierre Charles L'Enfant, a French engineer, was chosen to plan the new city of Washington. His plan surrounded large government buildings with public lawns, gardens, squares, and paths.

Land was soon cleared and construction began. The north, or Senate wing, of the Capitol was the first to be built. When the government moved permanently to Washington in 1800, this lone wing housed the Senate, House of Representatives, Supreme Court, and Library of Congress. Design alterations and war both slowed construction. Most of the still-unfinished Capitol was destroyed when the invading British army attacked Washington in 1814 and left the city a burned ruin.

Immediately, plans were made to rebuild, using the original designs—and a copper-covered wooden dome was added. During the American Civil War, that dome was replaced by the current, much larger iron dome. An engineering masterpiece, it's made of 8,909,200 pounds of cast iron. Despite the wartime effort and cost, President Abraham Lincoln viewed the completion of the Capitol as a symbol that the union of states, the United States, would succeed.

Today, visitors can tour the Capitol, visit historic public rooms, and read copies of famous documents. From balcony seats above, you can watch sessions of the House or Senate. On the main floor, you can stand in the rotunda, under the ceiling of the beautiful, iron Capitol dome. There, let your eyes follow the path of world history around the painted *frieze* that borders its rim. From its beginning, the Capitol building was intended to be seen, enjoyed, and used. It serves today as a symbol of what purposeful, thoughtful leaders can achieve.

Do You Know?

In 1863, the Capitol dome was crowned by a bronze statue called Freedom. Freedom is over nineteen feet tall and weighs more than 15,000 pounds. The Latin motto on its base reads: *E PLURIBUS UNUM*, meaning "Out of many, one" or, "out of many states, one nation."



In 1993, the 130-year-old statue was removed by helicopter, completely restored, and refitted to the dome. Preservation and restoration of Washington's historic buildings and works of art is an ongoing effort. Extra care is taken to ensure that the original design, materials, and appearance are retained.

PD-Photo/Courtesy Architect of the Capitol

Discussion questions

1. The Capitol was still unfinished in 1814 when it was burned during a war with the British. Research the name of that war and the reasons it was being fought.
2. If a U.S. ton weighs 2,000 pounds, how many tons does the Capitol's iron dome weigh?
3. The city of Washington was built on a hill alongside a famous river. Look at a map of Washington and find the name of that river.



THE CAPITOL BUILDING



Ceiling of the Capitol dome



Capitol dome and steps

