

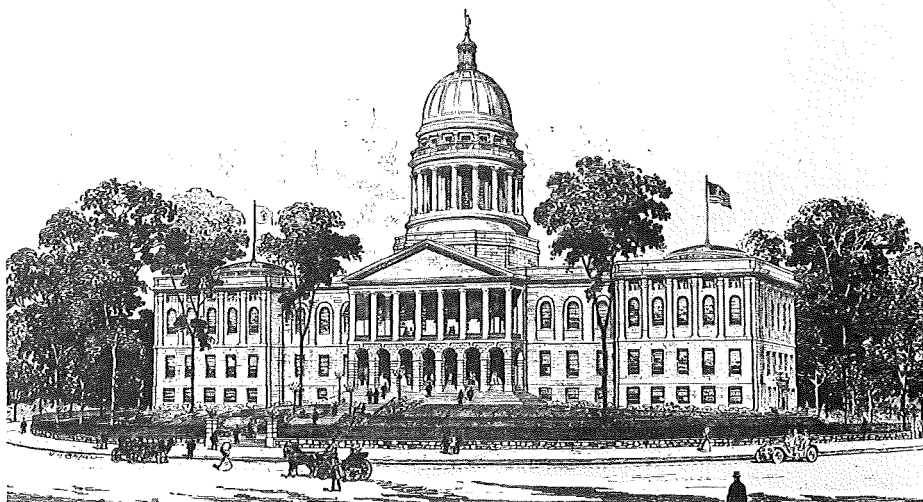
# MAINE STATE LEGISLATURE

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The  
MAINE STATE HOUSE



A BRIEF HISTORY  
and  
GUIDE

by  
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and  
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Maine Historic Preservation Commission

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*Front Cover: Architectural rendering of the State House as  
reconstructed in 1909-10.*

## *Introduction*

The State House in Augusta is the single most public structure in Maine. It serves two distinct but inter-related functions. First, the building is the center of state government. Within its walls the day to day business of government is carried out.

Secondly, the State House stands as a tangible symbol of the achievements of the past, the vitality of the present and the aspirations of the future. In its symbolic role, the architecture, both exterior and interior, eloquently reflects the purpose for which the building was designed. From the day of its opening in 1832 through subsequent structural and cosmetic changes, the State House has been a "living museum" whose function might be termed "the fashioning of history."

As the visitor passes through its corridors, he may reflect that beside him walk the spirits of Maine's great leaders: her first governor, William King; Lincoln's first Vice-President, Hannibal Hamlin; Joshua Chamberlain, hero of Gettysburg, Governor and college president; the "plumed knight," James G. Blaine, presidential candidate and Secretary of State; and Percival Baxter, Governor and philanthropist.

This is a building for all the people of Maine, which also welcomes visitors to the state who wish to share in this expression of our heritage.

## *A Brief History*

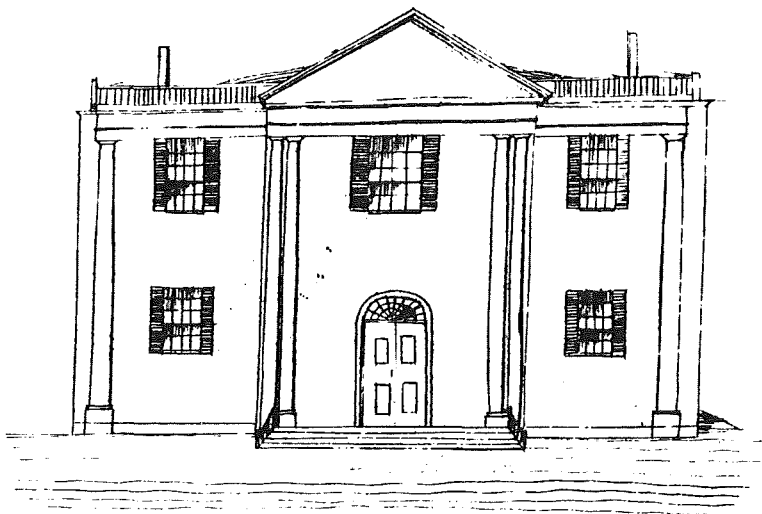
1820 - 1833

With the passage of the Missouri Compromise in 1820, Maine was separated from Massachusetts and became a state. As the site of the constitutional convention, Portland was chosen as the temporary capitol, and a modest two story frame State House was erected in the Federal style to accommodate the new government. Within a year the search for a permanent capitol began. Portland, Brunswick, Hallowell, Waterville, Belfast, Wiscasset and Augusta soon emerged as the leading aspirants. The Legislature finally chose Augusta, and Governor Enoch Lincoln signed the bill which established the Kennebec River town as the official capitol on February 24, 1827. Four months later the Governor and his Executive Council selected a thirty-four acre site for a new building.

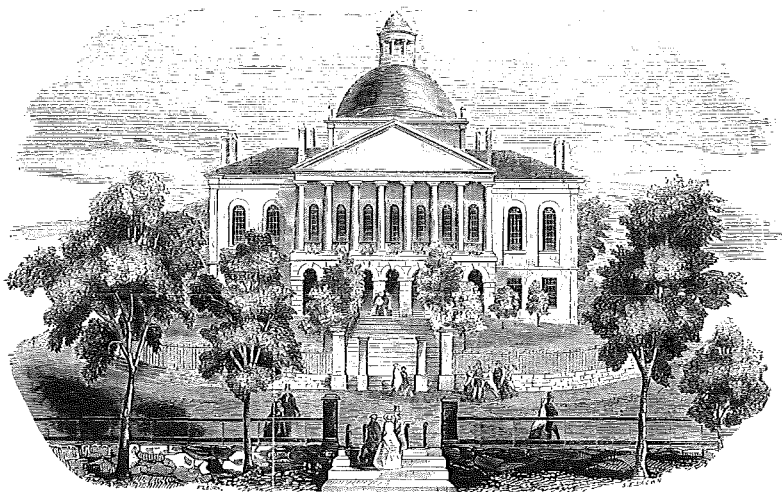
Appropriately, General William King of Bath, the principal exponent of Maine's statehood as well as its first governor, was appointed Commissioner of Public Buildings in 1828 to initiate the State House project. King turned for assistance to Charles Bulfinch, who was then serving as the architect of the U.S. Capitol in Washington, D.C. Bulfinch responded in 1829 with a complete set of drawings which numbered approximately one hundred and survives today in the Maine State Library.

Concerning this last major work of his career, Charles Bulfinch wrote to William King in 1829:

I have endeavored, while preserving the general outline of the Boston State House, to prevent its being a servile Copy; and have aimed at giving it an air of simplicity, which, while I hope it will appear reconcilable to good taste, will render it easy to execute in your material.



*The first State House, built in 1820, at Congress and Myrtle Streets in Portland. Used by the state government until 1832, it was destroyed in the Great Fire of 1866.*



*The State House from an engraving in the November 19, 1853, issue of Gleason's Pictorial Drawing Room Companion.*

Indeed, Bulfinch's design for the Maine State House was a striking transformation of his Federal style brick Massachusetts State House of three decades before into a bold granite statement of the Greek Revival.

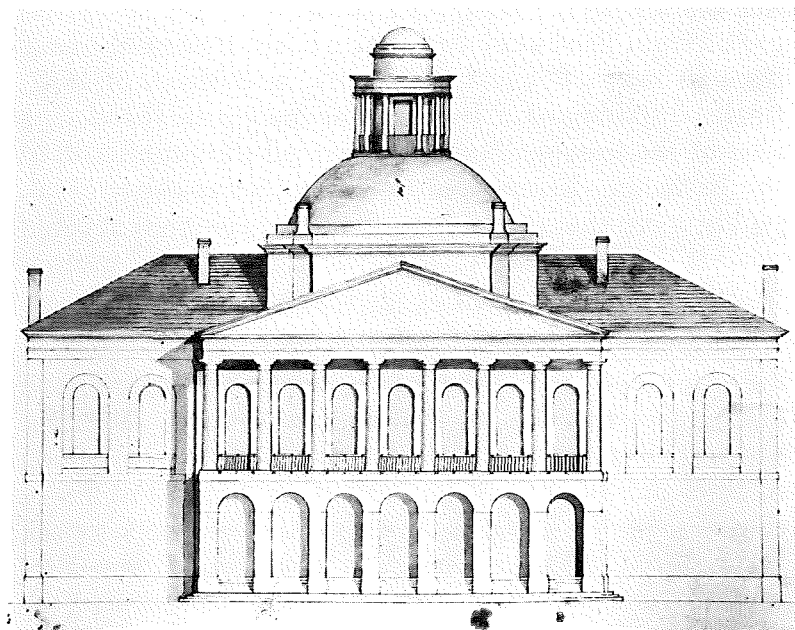
The construction of Maine's new capitol building began with a cornerstone laying ceremony on July 4, 1829. With the advent of a new administration in 1830, King was replaced as Building Commissioner by William Clark of Hallowell. Clark, in turn, gave way to Reuel Williams of Augusta, who guided the project until its completion in January, 1832. While the structure was originally estimated to cost \$80,000, a series of changes in plan and construction delays brought about by political disagreements resulted in a final bill of \$145,000. Despite these difficulties the Legislature's Joint Standing Committee on Public Buildings noted with pride in 1833 that Maine had been "furnished with a building of as splendid workmanship and excellent materials, as any State in the Union can boast of ..."

### *1833 - 1888*

Not everyone agreed with the official assessment of the merits of Maine's new State House in Augusta. Almost from the day its doors opened, the building was attacked on the basis of leaking roofs, faulty chimneys, and insufficient as well as poorly ventilated space. While the complaints lodged may well have been valid, they also often appear to have been inspired by a lingering bitterness that Portland had forfeited the distinction of being the State capitol to Augusta. This bitterness was to plague the Maine political scene for the next eight decades. Between 1833 and 1888 it flared on two significant occasions, once in 1837 and again in 1860. This period was also marked by two proposed State House remodelings, one which became a reality and another which remained on paper.



*Charles Bulfinch, 1763-1844*



*Bulfinch's 1829 drawing of the State House*



The seeds of Portland's first attempt to recapture the capitol were sown in 1835 when a group of local citizens commissioned Richard Bond of Boston to design a massive three story rectangular granite building in the Greek Revival style. Featuring a colonnaded facade and a saucer dome, Bond's Merchants Exchange bore a marked resemblance to Isaiah Rogers' New York Exchange of the same year. Encouraged by the results of a public subscription, the supporters of an Exchange for Portland incorporated in March, 1836 and began construction in October.

When a nationwide financial panic struck early in 1837, only the Exchange's foundation and part of its basement story were finished. Prospects for completing the remainder were in jeopardy because more than a half of the building company's \$76,500 was in the form of pledges that could not be met.

The plight of the Exchange project coincided with the first attempt in the Maine Legislature to return the capitol to Portland. The House and Senate hotly debated the issue through most of January, February, and March of 1837, finally disposing of it by a narrow margin in the closing days of the session. During this period the proprietors of the Exchange championed the cause of capitol removal, pointing out that their new building, if completed, could provide "eligible accommodations ... for the more extended meeting of the legislature of our State."

Without hope of private or state support, the owners of the Exchange sold their plans, land, and unfinished building to the City of Portland in January, 1838, for \$14,000, less than half their cost. Between the beginning of 1838 and the close of 1839, the City spent \$110,000 to complete the Exchange in an effort to create work for the unemployed and as an investment in the future. The latter reasoning was reflected in the following commentary by the *Portland Transcript* on November 30, 1839:

It has been intimated that a serious effort will be made at the approaching session of the Legislature to remove the seat of government again to this place. It has been seen that a great mistake was made when it was transferred to Augusta, and there has been almost annually manifested an uneasiness and attempts at change. This feeling of dissatisfaction has ripened to a strong determination to remove from that place, and we are glad to have it in our power to say that if the plan should be carried into effect, the new Exchange has ample accommodations to receive the various branches of government, and provide for them as conveniently and we may say more comfortably than they are now accommodated at Augusta.

However, the *Transcript's* prediction of a "serious effort" on behalf of Portland's cause in the Legislature of 1840 did not materialize. The issue had diminished enough in intensity by 1853 to allow for the appropriation of several thousand dollars to carry out the first remodeling of the State House interior. This modification of Bulfinch's plan included the removal of fireplaces and document rooms at the corners of the House of Representatives, making the room square and at the same time providing more space. Similar space creating measures were taken in the Senate Chamber as well as throughout the remainder of the building. In addition, gas lighting was installed for the first time.

The following year Portland's Merchants Exchange was destroyed by fire. Prompted by the need for a new public building, the city fathers held an architectural competition early in 1858. Designs were received from Richard Bond, James H. Rand of Boston, Alfred Stone of Salem and Charles H. Howe and J.G. Lewis, both of Portland. Rand was declared the winner in May, 1858, on the basis of his plans for a three story Italianate style structure with a rusticated sandstone facade crowned by a central dome.

In scale and sophistication, Rand's Italianate City Hall was comparable to Bond's Exchange of two decades before. As the building rose between 1858 and 1860, Portland's ambitions for restoration as the capitol of Maine rekindled. Newspapers such as the *Bangor Times* were quick to realize the city's intentions. In its July 3, 1858 issue, the *Times* commented:

We hear that our Portland neighbors have adopted a beautiful plan for their proposed municipal structure. It is to be large and commodious enough for the Legislature, if it should be determined to remove the capitol thither. If they put up a beautiful structure, creditable to the State government, who knows but that they might attract the State government out of that Granite cage at Augusta.

Hopes for reacquiring the capitol ran so high in Portland that the *Transcript* referred in 1859 to an elegant chandelier from Philadelphia as having been ordered for the House of Representatives in the new city hall. Sentiments culminated in 1860 with the introduction of another capitol removal measure before the legislature. As in 1837 it suffered a narrow defeat. However, unlike its earlier counterpart, it also resulted in the immediate appropriation of additional remodeling funds to provide for more space in the context of the existing building.

The Civil War postponed further consideration of relocating Maine's capitol. If anything the conflict pointed out that Portland's coastal location made it more vulnerable to attack and capture during wartime and thus less desirable as a seat of government.

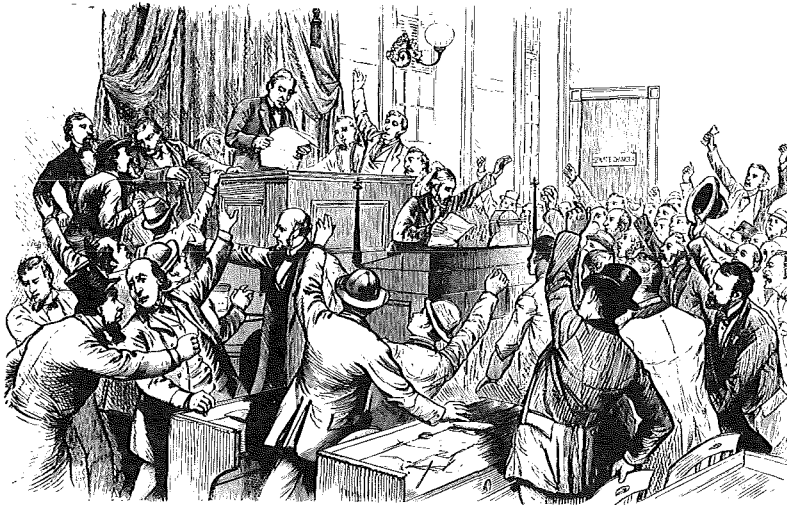
Within two years of the war's end, the Maine Legislature again addressed the State House question. On February 26, 1867, the House of Representatives voted:

That the Governor and Council be requested to obtain plans and specifications for such exten-

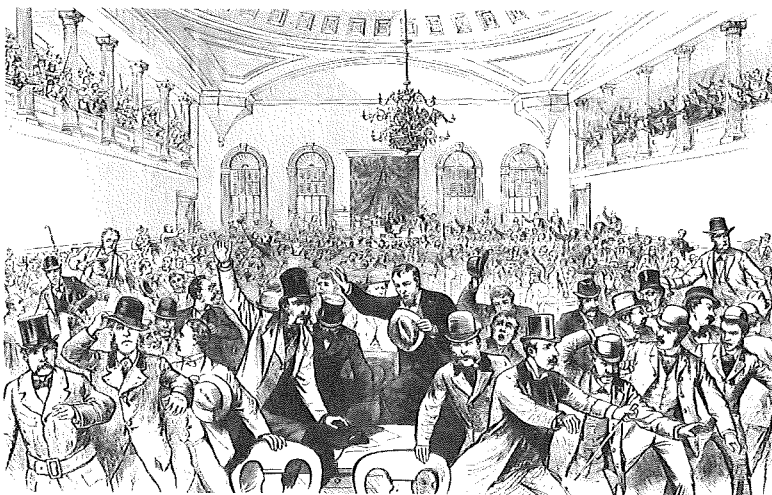
sions of the capitol building as may give security from fire and other damage to the archives and library of the State together with suitable committee rooms and such other conveniences for the House of Representatives as may in their judgment be required and report the same to the next Legislature.

Governor Joshua L. Chamberlain and his Executive Council responded to the Legislature's request by retaining the services of Gridley J.F. Bryant and Louis P. Rogers of Boston. An architect of national reputation for his public buildings, Bryant was already a familiar figure on the Maine scene, having designed three county jails, two court houses, two municipal buildings, two schools, a custom house, and the State Reform School. After six months of work, Bryant and Rogers submitted elaborate drawings for the enlargement and remodeling of the State House. These plans recommended the construction of an extension eighty feet to the rear which would be the same width as the existing building and would stand three stories high. The architects also suggested that a Mansard roof be added to the entire structure, raising it another story and thus necessitating the enlargement of the dome.

Lack of funds apparently prevented the Legislature from realizing Bryant and Rogers' ambitious scheme for the Maine State House. Yet the need for safer as well as more spacious accommodations in which to conduct the business of state government did not diminish. In 1884 the Legislature once more instructed the Governor and Council to investigate the enlargement of the State House. On July 29, 1884, a committee of the Executive Council met with Francis H. Fassett, an experienced Portland architect, to outline the state's requirements for expanding the Capitol Building. The committee members requested that Fassett prepare plans for a wing forty-six feet wide by eighty-five feet long to be added to the rear of the existing structure. They also placed in the architect's hands the Bryant and



*The Senate (above) and the House (below) in action during the disputed election of 1879. From engravings in the January 24, 1880, issue of Frank Leslie's Illustrated Newspaper.*



Rogers plans in order for him to estimate their current construction cost. Like Bryant and Rogers before him, Fassett's efforts toward remodeling were to go unfunded.

### *1889 - 1891*

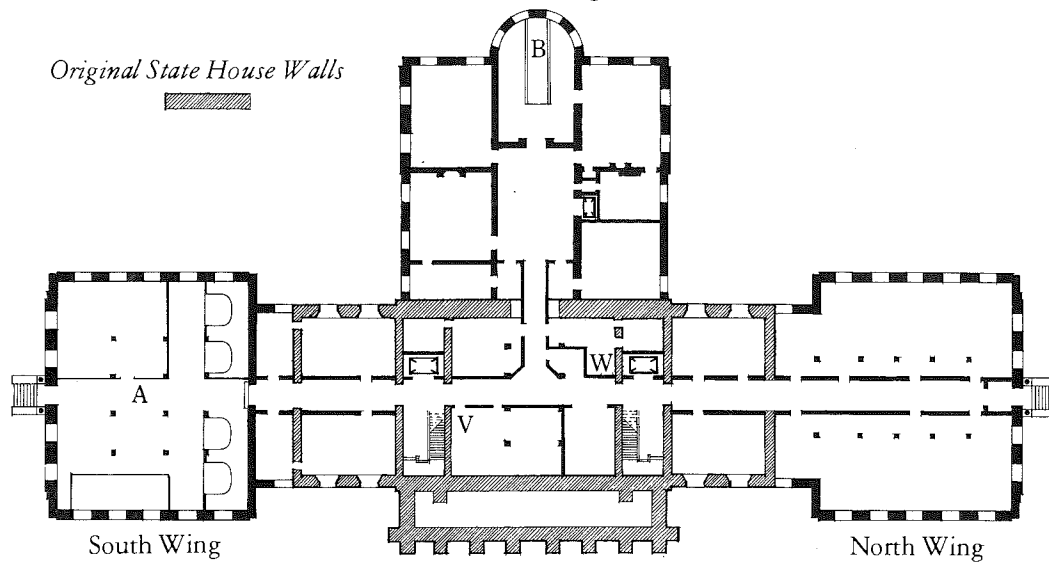
The Legislative session for 1889 marked a turning point in resolving the issue of enlarging the Maine State House versus moving the capitol to Portland. A legislative committee was appointed to study the matter and visited Portland to inspect proposed sites. Shortly thereafter the Committee held a series of hearings in Augusta which were attended by several hundred citizens from throughout the state. The proponents of Portland's cause hired special trains to bring southern Maine's most prominent political and business figures to testify on behalf of the city. In addition, the City of Portland offered to provide a site worth \$100,000 and \$100,000 in cash toward the construction of a new state house. Its two leading architects, Francis H. Fassett and John Calvin Stevens, each prepared and circulated a set of plans for a building costing approximately \$500,000.

In defense, the people of Augusta retained John Calvin Spofford of the Boston partnership of Brigham and Spofford to discredit Fassett and Stevens' estimates and advocate instead the economy of constructing an addition to the rear of the existing building. Spofford's firm had recently won the competition for the Massachusetts State House extension. In his testimony before the committee, Spofford stated that the Fassett and Stevens plans would cost from \$800,000 to \$1,500,000, depending upon the degree of ornamentation and type of material used.

Although Fassett, Stevens, and many of Portland's advocates rose to refute the architect from Boston, he had succeeded in planting the seed of doubt for which his Augusta patrons had hoped. When the legislative committee filed its report in March, 1889, it recommended the

West Wing

Original State House Walls



South Wing

First Floor

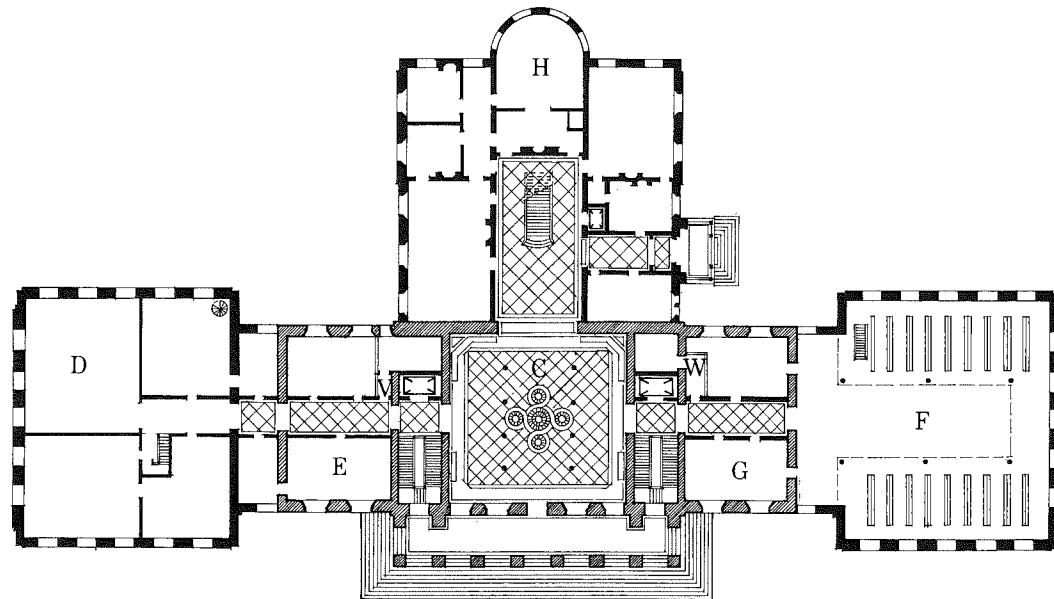
North Wing

A. Old State Museum

B. Tunnel to State Office Building

V. Restrooms (Ladies)

W. Restrooms (Men)



Second Floor

C. Hall of Flags

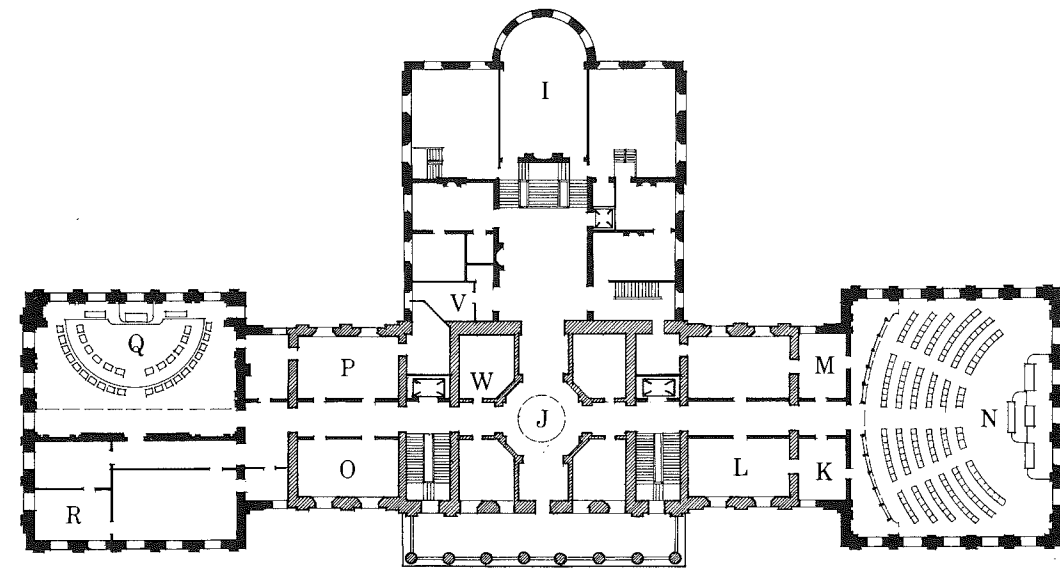
D. Appropriations Committee Hearing Room

E. Offices of the Secretary of State

F. Law Library

G. Offices of the Attorney General

H. Office of the Governor



Third Floor

I. State Government Committee Hearing Room

J. Octagon Hall

K. Office of the Speaker of the House

L. House Leadership Offices

M. Office of the House Clerk

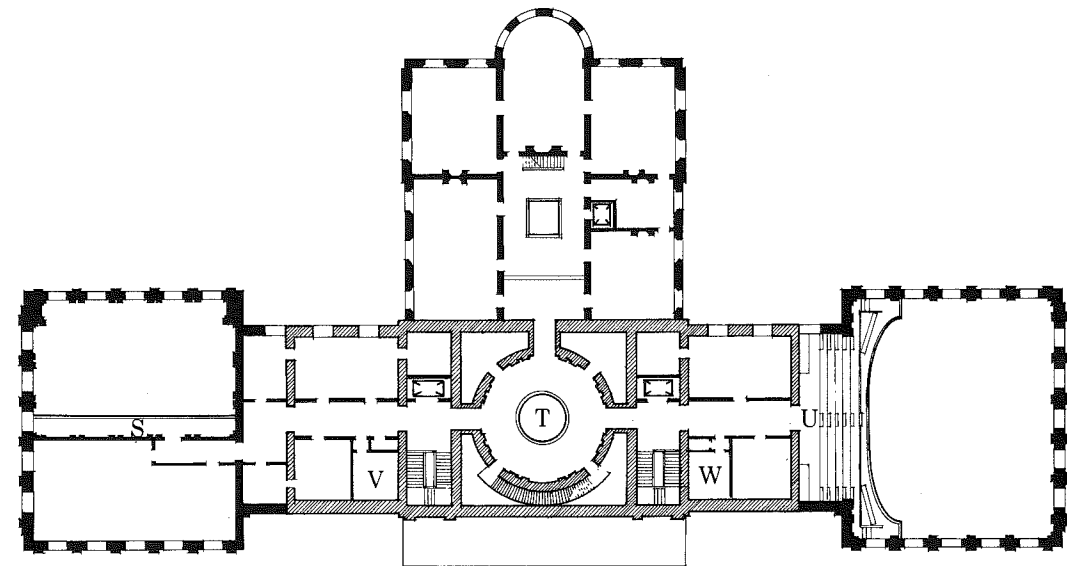
N. House Chamber

O. Senate Leadership Offices

P. Senate Administrative Offices

Q. Senate Chamber

R. Office of the Senate President



Fourth Floor

S. Senate Gallery

T. Rotunda

U. House Gallery

Floor plans drawn by Christopher Glass

capitol remain in Augusta and that a major wing be added to the back of the State House. Governor Edwin C. Burleigh and his Council responded immediately by scheduling a hearing on the matter for April 3, 1889. The meeting was attended by six of Maine's leading architects, Francis H. Fassett and his partner Frederick A. Tompson, John Calvin Stevens and his partner Albert Winslow Cobb as well as George M. Coombs of Lewiston and Edwin E. Lewis of Gardiner. These architects presented a united front in urging the Governor and Council to hold a competition in which they and other members of their profession, both in and out of the state, could compete for the opportunity to design the State House addition.

While the Maine architects pleaded their case, John C. Spofford waited in another part of the State House to be summoned for a private interview. When that interview was completed, Spofford's firm was awarded the commission, much to the consternation of the Maine architectural community and the Maine press. As the *Portland Daily Press* commented on April 6, 1889:

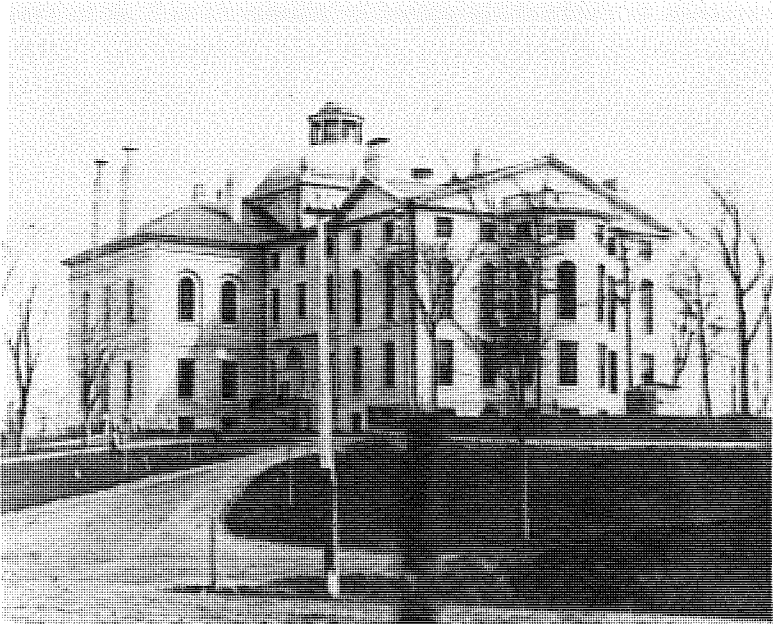
Messrs. Brigham and Spofford are no doubt very good architects; but it is difficult to see what there is in their connection with the Massachusetts State House that they should be put above competition with other architects, or that the honorable Capitol Commissioners should on their account proclaim: "No Maine architects need apply."

Brigham and Spofford's addition to the Maine State House was constructed between 1890 and 1891 at a cost of \$150,000. This large three story wing provided new accommodations for the state library as well as badly needed additional office space. Constructed of granite, its restrained Neo-Greek Revival lines were designed to harmonize with Bulfinch's original building.





*John C. Spofford, 1854-1932*



*The West Wing constructed between 1890 and 1891 from designs by J.C. Spofford.*

## *1891 - 1910*

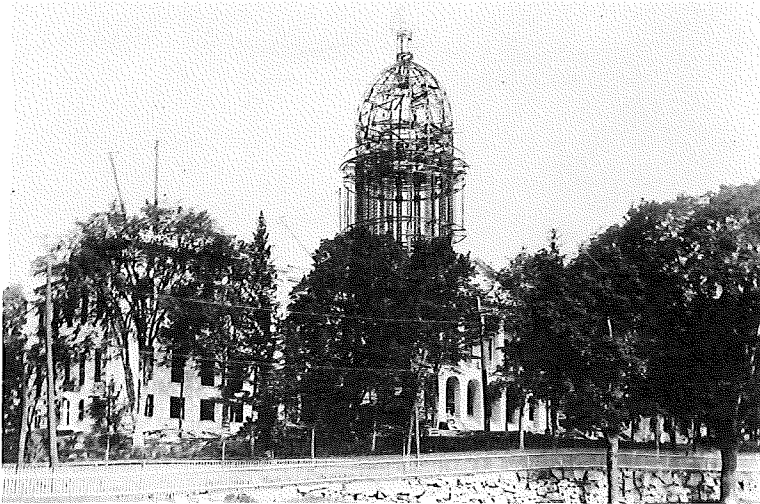
Eighteen years after Portland's vigorous campaign to regain the capitol, the issue was addressed for the last time in 1907 session of the Maine Legislature. The question of inadequate space in the State House had been raised once more, and the Committee on Public Buildings and Grounds called a hearing on the matter for February 13, 1907. The purpose of the hearing was, in the words of the Committee, "to inquire into the expediency of a change in location of the seat of government and erection of a new state house." The time-honored debates were given their final airing, and the committee's verdict had the familiar conclusion of enlarging the State House in Augusta.

Desiring to settle the issue permanently, the next session of the Legislature in 1909 created the Commission on the Enlargement of the State House. Probably recalling the criticism of their predecessors, this body advertised for sketches in every daily paper in Maine as well as in two published in Boston. Another Boston architect, G. Henri Desmond, emerged as the winner of the competition in the summer of 1909.

While Brigham and Spofford's rear wing of 1890 - 91 had preserved most of the exterior of Bulfinch's State House, Desmond's proposals radically altered the building on both the exterior and the interior. Using a matching granite, the architect more than doubled the length of the structure by adding large wings to the north and south sides. To compensate for this increase in size, he replaced the low saucer dome with one which rises 185 feet. The only Bulfinch features to remain were the impressive portico at the center of the facade and the wall immediately behind and adjacent to it. Made at a cost of \$350,000 between 1909 and 1910, these changes marked the final stage in the architectural evolution of the Maine State House and firmly established Augusta rather than Portland as the state capitol.

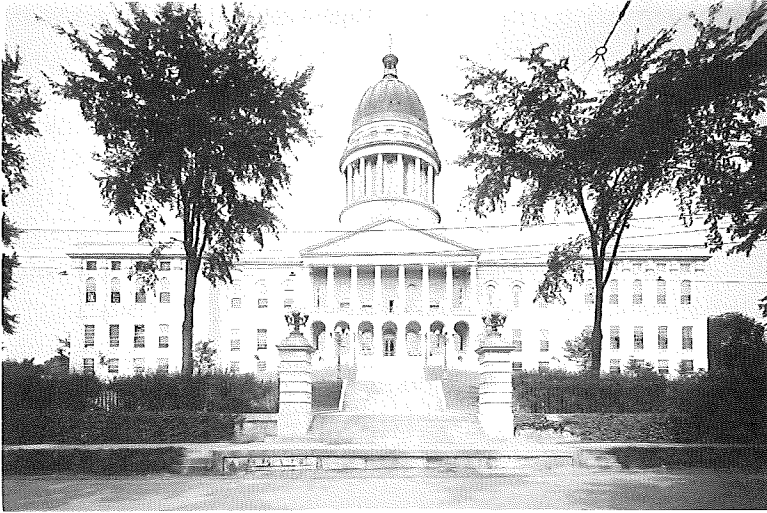


*G. Henri Desmond, 1876-1965*



*The State House under reconstruction in 1910 from designs by  
G. Henri Desmond.*





*The State House ca. 1920*

## *A Self-Guided Tour*

Visitors taking this self-guided tour should enter the State House by the first floor door at the end of the south wing. This gives access to the ground floor from where, either by stairs or elevator, the upper floors can be visited.

The plan for each floor of the building is uniform throughout. From a central chamber under the dome on every floor except the first, corridors lead into the north and south wings respectively while a broad hall extends into the west wing. All corridor floors above the first are of white marble with a colored border.

Immediately inside the south wing door is a large room which formerly housed the State Museum. Still remaining are four highly detailed and artistically beautiful dioramas depicting Maine fauna and flora. Principal subjects include beaver, bears, deer and moose as well as numerous other animals and birds. A plaque on the right hand wall

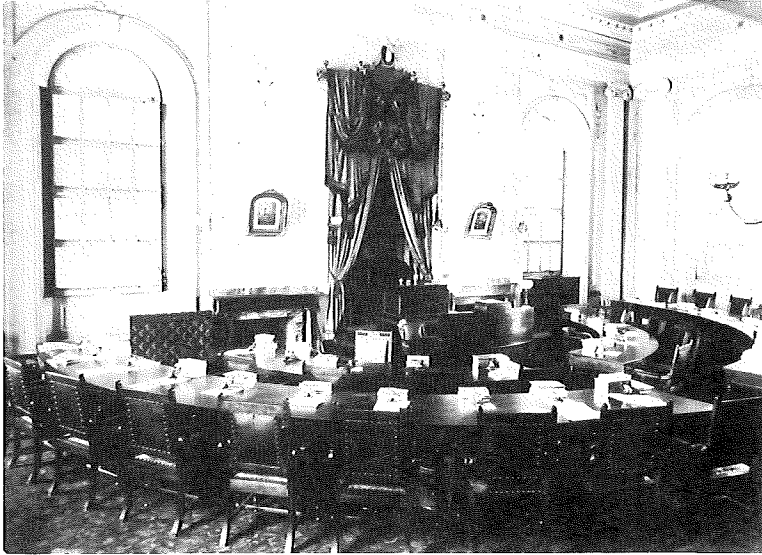
at the entrance to the corridor commemorates the fact that these works of art were created by Klir A. Beck, a naturalist and artist. Opposite this is a plaque from the People of Maine honoring Gov. Percival P. Baxter for his extraordinary gift of the 200,000 acre Baxter State Park to the State as well as one erected in 1924 by Gov. Baxter to the memory of his dog "Garry," a State House favorite. At the left of the corridor entrance is a display case showing trophy size examples of Maine fresh water sport fish.

A short way into the corridor take either the stairs on the right or the elevator on the left to the second floor. Then, turning north, enter the Hall of Flags. This imposing chamber under the dome of the Capitol is divided into three aisles by two rows of Doric columns. Here are displayed Maine battle flags and portraits of some of the state's most noted political figures including Thomas B. Reed, James G. Blaine, Hannibal Hamlin, William King, Margaret Chase Smith, and Edmund S. Muskie.

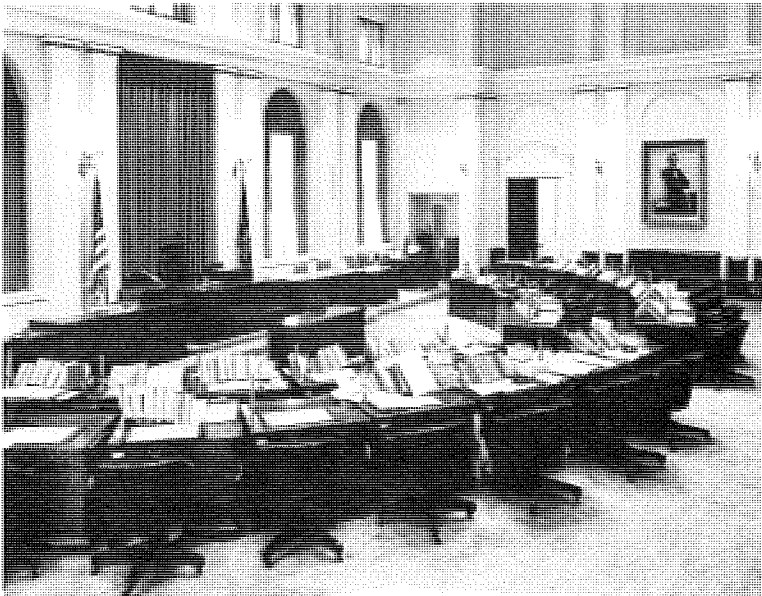
At the end of the south corridor is the large Appropriations and Financial Affairs Committee Hearing Room and along its east side the offices of the Secretary of State. The Law Library occupies quarters at the end of the north corridor and along its east side lie the offices of the Attorney General.

Returning to the Hall of Flags, the visitor should turn toward the west wing. At the entrance are bronze tablets mounted on pilasters to either side. That on the right bears a brief history of the construction of the State House, while on the left is the Moses Owen poem, *The Returned Maine Battle Flags!*

To the left and behind a broad marble staircase are the offices of the Governor with the Cabinet Room in the northwest corner. Climbing the staircase to the landing where it divides, the visitor reaches the hearing room of the State Government Committee. When the west wing was built in 1890, this imposing chamber housed the State



*The old Senate Chamber ca. 1870*



*The new Senate Chamber today*

Library, which in 1910 moved to the location of the present Law Library and later to a separate building. The next few stairs lead to the third floor west wing.

Here on the south wall, mounted in a handsome classical oak mantelpiece, is a terra cotta bas relief. Representing the return of volunteers from the Civil War, it is a facsimile of a fragment of the frieze from the Pension Building in Washington, D.C.

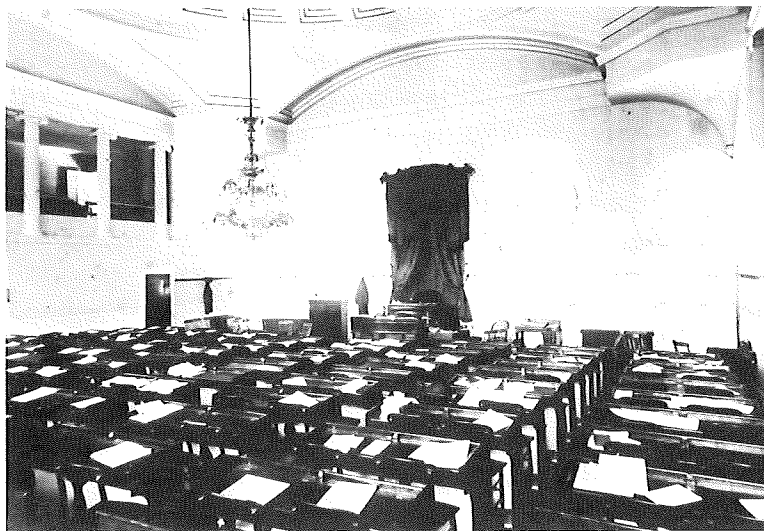
The Octagonal Hall on the third floor, under the great central dome, is notable for the simplicity of its architectural treatment. The inside of the dome is visible upward through the rotunda well of the fourth floor. The north wing corridor contains the offices of the House Speaker, other members of the House leadership, the House Clerk, and Legislative Information. At the end is the chamber of the House of Representatives.

This large rectangular hall is two stories in height and flooded with light from a double tier of windows along three walls. The classic decorative scheme of the interior is enhanced by slender Corinthian pilasters with gilt capitals supporting a heavy cross-beam ceiling. The impressive speaker's rostrum rises at the opposite side from the entrance and faces the semi-circular rows of members' seats.

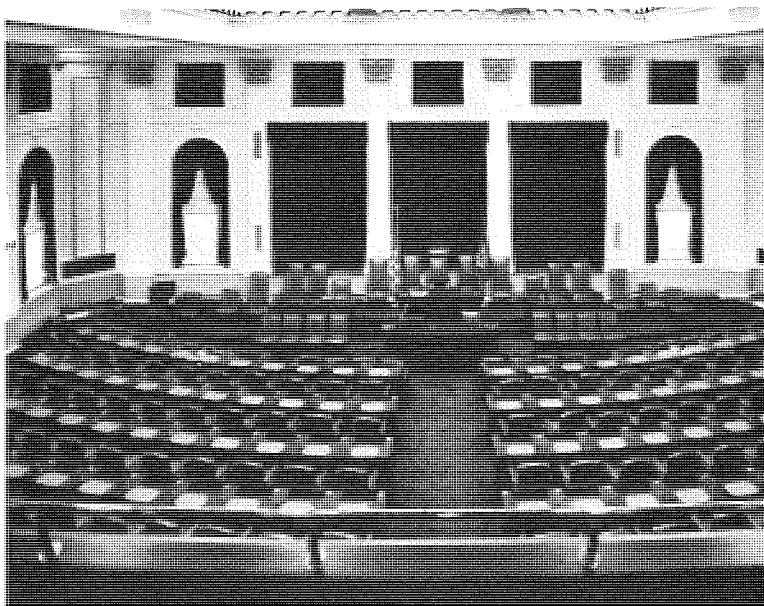
The south wing corridor which houses the Senate's leadership and administrative offices terminates with the Senate Chamber and, to its left, the offices of the Senate President. The Senate Chamber is similar in style of decoration to that of the House, though somewhat smaller. The walls are adorned with pilasters of the Doric order which feature gilt capitals. The President's platform to the right faces two concentric rows of members' desks.

Taking the stairs or elevator just to the south of the Octagonal Hall, the fourth floor is reached. At the end of the south corridor is the gallery (now closed to the public) of the Senate Chamber. The Rotunda, in the center of the





*The old House Chamber ca. 1870*



*The new House Chamber today.*

building, rises three stories above the fourth floor culminating in an impressive domed ceiling. Narrow balconies with delicate iron railings encircle the rotunda at two levels. Designed with restraint, the rotunda walls are relieved only by the simple lines of paired Doric pilasters and denticulated cornices. The perspective of the lofty dome is graceful and impressive. The north corridor terminates in the entrance to the House Chamber gallery which provides an excellent view of this handsome hall.

Taking the stairs or elevator in the north wing, the visitor is urged to descend to the second floor and exit through the main (east) door which leads onto the portico from the Hall of Flags. After viewing the impressive proportions of the arcade, a walk down the terraced steps will provide an excellent panorama of the original Bulfinch front which includes the classical portico and two bays of arched windows on either side.

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