



## A DESCRIPTION OF CAPITOL SQUARE

### The Grounds

Today the historic grounds and buildings of Capitol Square are recognized as an ideal downtown location for legislation, inauguration and commemoration. However, the public area surrounding the 1788 Capitol was originally a weed-filled, virtually treeless open square with informal lanes and footpaths. In 1816 the General Assembly hired architect and landscape gardener Maximilian Godefroy to layout a formal park. Two years later the newly-landscaped grounds were enclosed by a cast- and wrought-iron fence and this area soon afterwards came to be known as Capitol Square. In the 1850s John Notman, a native of Edinburgh, Scotland, who practiced architecture and landscape gardening in Philadelphia, developed a plan of meandering walkways and native trees and shrubs that gave Capitol Square much of the appeal it retains today. Notman channeled the springs in the Square to two fountains he placed near its southeast and southwest corners. These fountains are now fed by a municipal water supply.

### Public Monuments

The large equestrian statue of George Washington atop a granite pedestal is located just northwest of the Capitol at the formal entrance to the square. This monument was conceived to honor Washington and to glorify Virginia's contributions to independence. Virginia's role in the Revolution is depicted by six of her

sons surrounding General Washington, who is dressed in a military uniform. Smaller allegorical figures below the six pedestrian statues are inscribed with themes reflecting each patriot's contribution: Andrew Lewis, *Colonial Times*; Patrick Henry, *Revolution*; George Mason, *Bill of Rights*; Thomas Jefferson, *Independence*; Thomas Nelson, *Finance*; and John Marshall, *Justice*. American sculptor Thomas Crawford designed the monument. The cornerstone was laid on Washington's Birthday, February 22, 1850, and the Washington statue was unveiled on February 22, 1858. Crawford died in 1857 after completing the statues of Washington, Jefferson and Henry. His American colleague Randolph Rogers executed the statues of Mason, Marshall, Nelson, and Lewis, as well as the allegorical figures, the last of which was put into place in 1868.

On the grounds north of the Capitol are bronze statues of former Virginia Governor and U.S. Senator Harry F. Byrd, Sr.; William "Extra Billy" Smith, Governor of Virginia and Confederate Brigadier General; Confederate Major General Thomas J. "Stonewall" Jackson; and Dr. Hunter Holmes McGuire, a respected Southern surgeon. In the southwest corner of the square near the Bell Tower is a seated statue of Edgar Allan Poe, who grew up in Richmond and returned years later to edit *The Southern Literary Messenger*.

### **The Executive Mansion**

The Executive Mansion stands just east of the Capitol within the grounds of Capitol Square. Designed by Boston architect Alexander Parris, the Federal-era Mansion has been the official residence of the Governor of Virginia and his family since its completion in March 1813. Many Presidents and foreign dignitaries have been entertained here. It is the nation's oldest Governor's residence in continuous use. A new Governor is elected every four years and inaugurated on the grounds of Capitol Square.

### **Other Public Buildings**

Facing Capitol Square on its northwest corner is the General Assembly Building, which incorporates the former Life Insurance Company of Virginia headquarters, a 1930 Beaux-Arts building. Immediately north of the Capitol is Old City Hall, a granite 1894 Gothic Revival masterpiece with a highly ornate public lobby (open Monday through Friday). The Neoclassical Finance Building, begun in 1893 as the Commonwealth's first state library building, stands to the east of the Capitol and below the Governor's Mansion. A second state library building, completed in 1940, stands north of the Governor's Mansion and is now undergoing renovation to become a reception center and offices for the Executive branch. In the southeast corner of the square is the twelve-story Washington Building, an imposing structure completed in 1924. Beyond the Square are other state office buildings named for Virginia-born U.S. presidents Jefferson, Madison, Monroe, and Tyler.

Standing in the southwest corner of the square is the brick Bell Tower. It was completed in 1825 for use by the Virginia Public Guard, a military predecessor to the present-day Virginia Capitol Police. The Bell Tower still tolls its bell each day to call the General Assembly into session. The Virginia Tourism Corporation maintains a public visitor center on the tower's first floor.

While the Capitol Building is closed for renovations, the public is invited to visit the Capitol Square Visitor Contact Station on the grounds north of the Capitol (#7 on the map).