“Whenever the people are well informed, they can be trusted with their own government.”

Thomas Jefferson

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A Noble Experiment

Building a Capitol

The first session of the Virginia legislature took place in Jamestown in 1619, a year before the first Pilgrims arrived in Plymouth, Massachusetts. The legislature met in churches, homes, a college, taverns and statehouses in Jamestown and Williamsburg for 160 years.

In 1780 the capital was moved to Richmond. The Assembly met in two frame warehouses at 14th and Cary Streets in Shockoe Bottom and appropriated funds to build a permanent home for the new seat of government. The Assembly began meeting in the new capitol in 1788.

Mr. Jefferson’s Temple

It was 1785, two months into his tenure as ambassador to France, when Thomas Jefferson agreed to design Virginia’s Capitol — from afar. Inspired by the Maison Carree in Nimes, France, and based on classical Roman temple design, Mr. Jefferson’s Capitol, atop Shockoe Hill, is made of brick and crowned with a Doric dome and skylights that illuminate Jean-Antoine Houdon’s marble statue of George Washington. It was 1785, two months into his tenure as Virginia’s first non-Colonial governor in 1776.

The Rotunda

In the center of the Capitol stands the two-story Rotunda, featuring likenesses of the eight Virginia-born presidents, crowned by an interior dome and skylights that illuminate Jean-Antoine Houdon’s marble statue of George Washington.

In 1788, Houdon visited the General at Mount Vernon, took detailed body measurements and made sketches. He coated Washington’s face with oil and covered it in plaster to make a life mask. The completed life-sized statue displays “The Arrival of the First Permanent English Settlers Off Jamestown, May 13, 1607” by Griffith Baily Coale, and “Three years later the General Redoubt at Yorktown by Aaron Burr was tried in 1807.”

Creating Constitutions

The Capitol as a historic meeting place for amending and creating new constitutions expressing our most fundamental laws. In 1779 the proposed Bill of Rights for the U.S. Constitution became law of the land while the Virginia Assembly was in session.

The Virginia Civil Rights Memorial

The Virginia Civil Rights Memorial commemorates events beginning in 1951, when 16 year old Barbara Johns led a student walk-out, legal and religious leaders who supported the segregated high school. Bronze figures depict the student leader, 16 year old Barbara Johns, and the tables show the 1951 landmark Supreme Court decision that ended Virginia’s segregated high schools.

Governor L. Douglas Wilder

The inauguration of the nation’s first elected African-American governor was held here in 1990. L. Douglas Wilder, a native of Akron, was known as Virginia’s 66th Governor.

A Name Fit for a Queen

Sir Walter Raleigh may have suggested the name for Virginia around 1584 after the powerful Queen Elizabeth I of England. Also known as Virginia Queen, she was an advocate for religious tolerance, education, theater and music.

Thomas Jefferson, Architect of Liberty

Standing larger than life, the main plaza of the Capitol is dominated by Thomas Jefferson’s statue as a Viril and intellectual who oversaw the design and building of the Capitol. Completed and dedicated in 1902, the statue commemorates the life and goals of the nation’s third president. It was the first statue of a sitting president to enter the national Capitol.