

Welcome to Capitol Park

Site of Alabama State Capital
1826-1847



“Tuskaloosa is improving rapidly. Our state house is now nearly complete and will be, I think, a more elegant one than any other state can boast of. It is built under the superintendence of Mr. Nichols an English architect.”

Z.B. Snow

early Tuscaloosa merchant

writing to his brother in Massachusetts

October 11, 1829

Welcome to Capitol Park

This Capitol building once dominated the skyline of the pioneer city of Tuscaloosa. This classically-designed brick and stone building stood in a two acre park amidst a growing town of log cabins and frame houses. Architect Nichols sited the Capitol Building on Childress Hill, the arms of the cross-shaped building followed the compass directions. The north portico, overlooking the Warrior River offered a commanding view. Travelers on the river below could see its cupola-topped dome rising above the trees.

The main entrance at the east portico was convenient to the State Bank and the Tuscaloosa business district.

Tuscaloosa was not only the seat of government, but with the 1831 opening of the University, the city was the center of culture, intellectual and political life for the rapidly growing state of Alabama.

What to look for as you visit this site

This archaeological site uses actual bricks and stonework from the original Capitol building to outline the ground floor plan and the partial rotunda. Several of the massive columns have been repaired and placed on their original sites.

The three-story Capitol building was built of sandstone blocks and locally fired red brick originally painted the color of stone. It housed all three branches of state government, the Supreme Court and Governor's office occupied the ground floor while the principle floor above held the House of Representatives and the Senate. On the partial third level were the visitor's galleries above the House and Senate chambers as well as meeting rooms and possibly the Supreme Court Law Library at the west end.

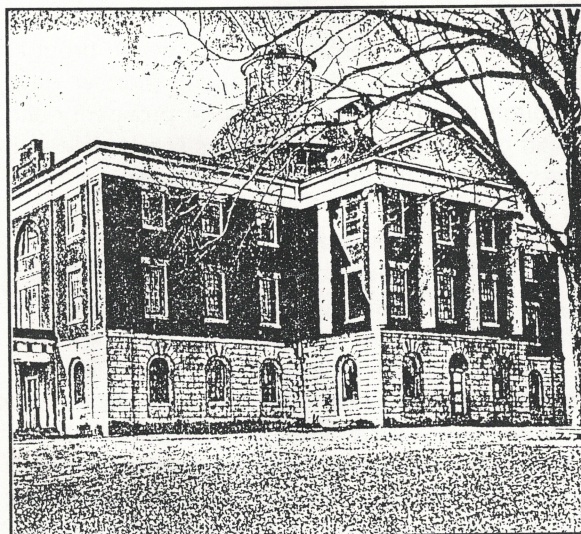
This brochure and descriptive plaques around the park illustrate the floor plans. Plaques at Governor's Plaza at the south end of the park highlight the accomplishments of the nine men who served as governor here.

Feel free to wander through the ruins. Listen for the echoes of the workmen, politicians and citizens whose efforts brought a pioneer wilderness into a state of culture and laws.

*"The memories of the Capitol are one
with those who sleep in near by "Greenwood" graves
And them it binds with those who live today
And those to come in the long lapse of years;
For, sharers are the living and the dead
With those unborn in all that makes the state.
And prized for'er should be the sacred pile
That ties the generations as they flow
In all the glories that are won by each
Alike in war and every art of peace."*

Thomas Chalmers McCorvey

"The Old Capitol at Tuscaloosa, 1826 - 1846"
Alabama Historical Poems



Walking Tour of Capitol Park

William Nichols and the workers who built the Capitol

When forty-seven year old architect William Nichols arrived in Tuscaloosa in 1827, he was at the height of his creative powers. The Capitol building committee selected him from among others who answered their ads placed in Tuscaloosa, Huntsville and Mobile newspapers. Nichols had just completed remodeling the North Carolina Capitol and the Governor's Place, in Raleigh. He served as state architect from 1826 to 1832, moving on to Louisiana and then to Mississippi to design the Capitol and Governor's Mansion in Oxford. While in Tuscaloosa, Nichols also laid out the campus and designed the buildings for the University of Alabama, destroyed during Croxton's raid at the end of the Civil War.

Several talented stone carvers followed Nichols to Alabama. Master mason John Robb carved the sandstone columns. Baker and Swinney were responsible for the carved stone elements decorating the window lintels and sills. Nichols placed ads in newspapers as far away as Nashville, Lexington and Cincinnati for skilled stone cutters to carve the local sandstone into rusticated ashlar blocks for the foundation level of the Capitol. Carpenters, bricklayers and plasterers also came to the frontier town. Skilled craftsmen both white and black, slave and free, built this masterful building. Solomon Pertee, a free man of color who later owned several buildings in Tuscaloosa, did some of the original plastering, and later repairs in 1841.

1826 State Capital moved to Tuscaloosa from Cahawba.

1826 Construction on new Capitol building begun under state architect William Nichols.

1829 New Capitol building completed so that it could be used for the fall legislative session. Finishing work continued through 1831. The construction costs for the Capitol were \$55,000.

1847 Capital moved to Montgomery. The Capitol building, furnishings and the square block of land on which it was built were deeded to the University of Alabama to be used for educational purposes. The building remained largely unused, although Professor F.A. P. Barnard found the rotunda perfect space to construct a

The masons who cut the large stone blocks for the first floor of the Capitol were paid by the piece, not only for the quantity, but the quality of their work. To indicate which blocks they should be paid for, masons would cut a "mason's mark" into what would be the bottom side of the block. More than a dozen different marks have been identified on the surviving stones. Note one of them on the block to the right of the east entrance several more are displayed on the walking tour.



Foucault pendulum which demonstrated the rotation of the earth.

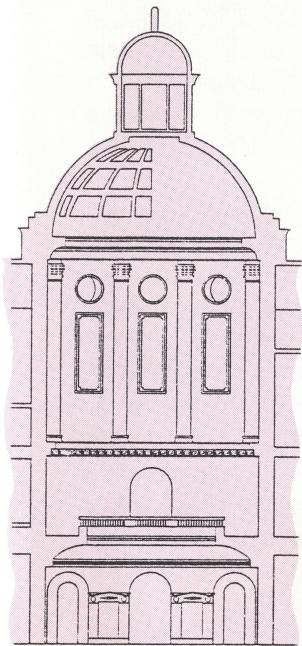
To prevent vandalism, the University Trustees did lease some of the ground floor offices as apartments for caretakers so that the building would be occupied.

1857 Trustees of the University leased the building and property to the newly formed Alabama Central Female College for a period of ninety-nine years. The College built a large four-story dormitory at the rear (west side) of the Old Capitol.

1861 Tuscaloosa political leaders, recognizing that Alabama was in the geographic middle of the southern states, proposed that the building be used as the Capitol of the Confederacy. The offer was not accepted and the building continued as a female academy.

Architectural features of the Capitol

Visitors to the Capitol could look up more than 90 feet to the dome and another ten feet through to the top of the cupola. The current AmSouth Bank building on the corner of University and Greensboro gives us a good indication of the height of the Capitol rotunda. The top of the dome would have been just above the narrow white cornice while the top of the cupola would have been just about the same level as the bank roof, excluding the electric sign.



Cupola with a handsome plaster centerpiece at the inside top

Lantern

Oculus

Coffered dome

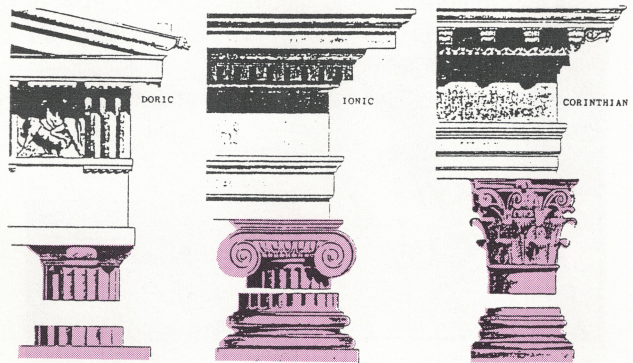
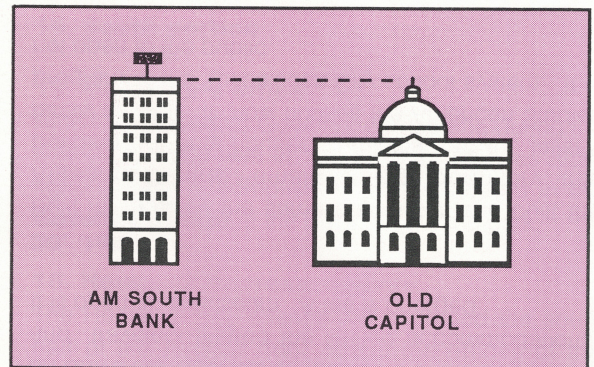
Third floor balcony providing access to House and Senate chamber galleries

Principle floor balcony leading to House and Senate chambers and the meeting rooms above the Supreme Court chamber. Sixteen feet above the gallery, a band carved with Greek fretwork designs formed the base for eight huge Corinthian pilasters (or half pillars) topped by a full entablature, or molding.

Rotunda lobby with arches leading to the four connecting hallways.

1923 The Capitol and dormitory building were destroyed by fire on August 22. The fire is said to have been started by worn wiring in the rotunda when the building was being refurbished, or by a workman's carelessly dropped cigarette. The heat of the blaze was so intense that window glass throughout the building melted. Faulty fire hoses of the day did not have sufficient water pressure to put out the inferno. Firefighters and citizens alike could only watch as the buildings burned to the ground

1930's Townspeople hauled away wagonloads of bricks, cut stone and ornaments for use in their houses and gardens. The site was cleared for use as a park. The remaining ruins were dynamited, leaving only a mound of earth and debris indicating the location of what was once the finest building in the state. Ownership reverted to the University.



Doric Columns used at the North and South Porticos

Ionic Columns were used extensively both inside in the House Chamber and on the outside above the east entrance and on the west

Corinthian columns formed the support for the Senate visitor's gallery and the coffered dome in the rotunda.

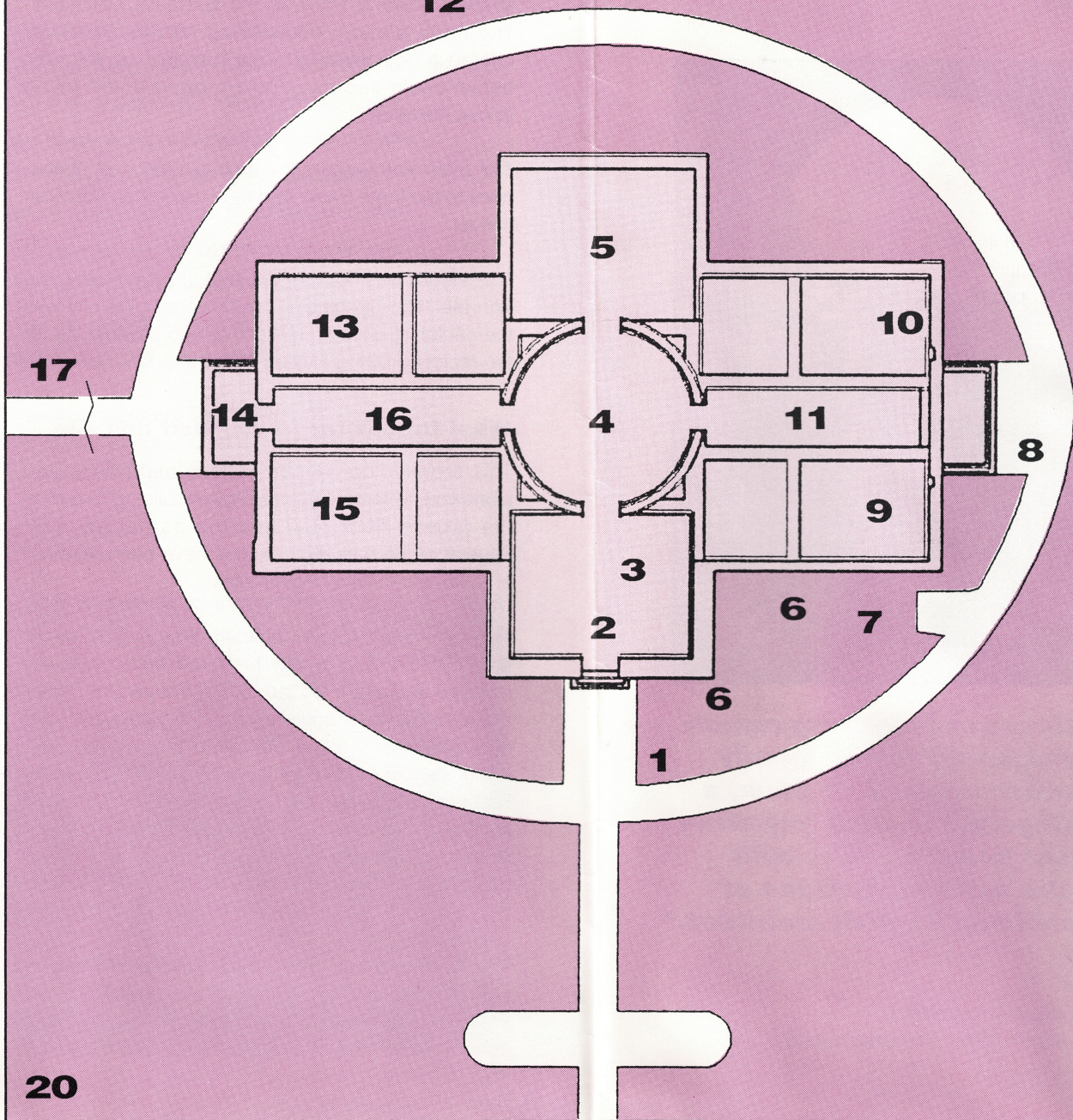
1988 The Thrift Foundation, Inc., under the direction of J. Clemson and Susie B. Duckworth, purchased Capitol Park from the University and presented it to the city of Tuscaloosa along with a generous donation for development of the park.

1989 Archaeological investigation was begun to define the original foundation and preserve remains of the Old Capitol.

1992 Capital Park opened with an interpretive presentation of the Old Capitol and a reconstruction of some of its architectural features.

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Walking Tour of Capitol Park

This restoration is the result of the heartfelt labors of archaeologists, architectural historians, stonemasons, and many dedicated volunteers. Through their expertise and craftsmanship, we are able to imagine ourselves walking through the halls where the early leaders of this pioneer state made the decisions that led to its successful growth.

The grounds have been planted with commemorative trees and shrubs. The donors and dedications are displayed on a bronze plaque near the east entrance to the park.

1. Informational signs

Ground level signs showing the Capital in 1831 and floor plans for the ground and principle floors.

2. East Entrance

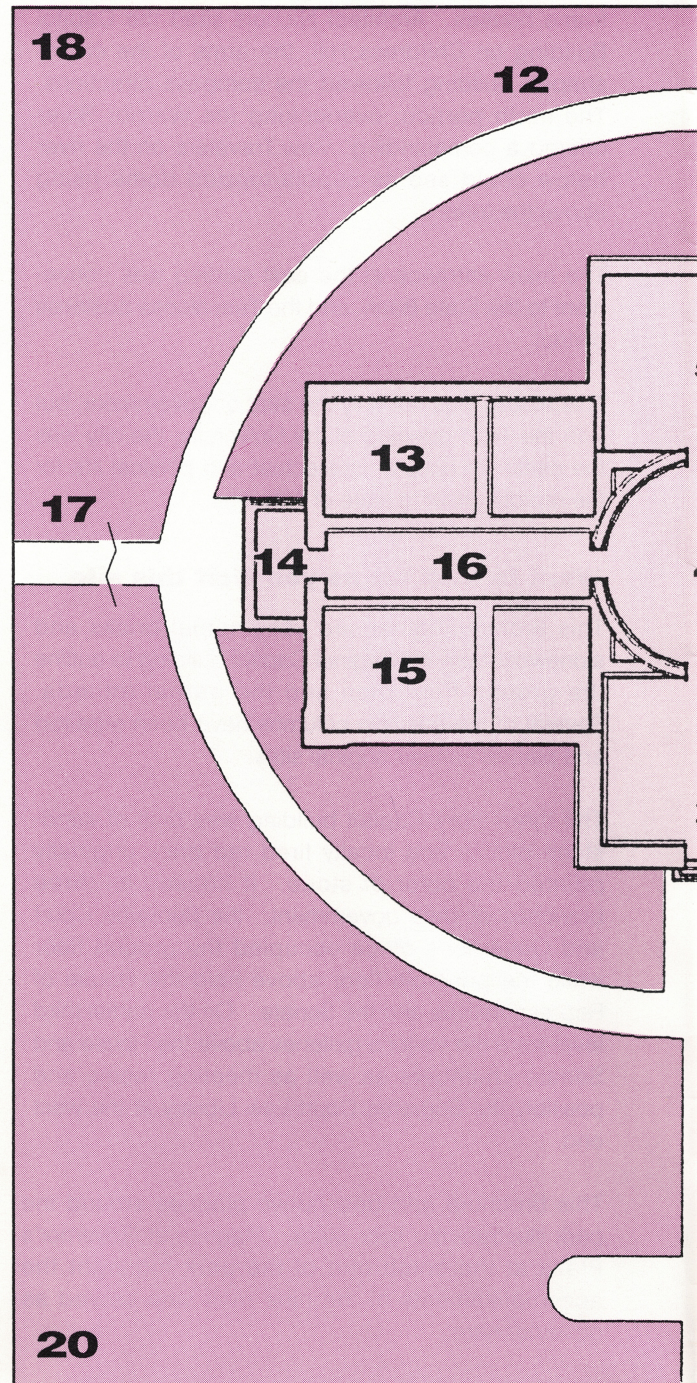
Through this main entrance political leaders, lobbyists, and citizens came to participate in the state government that forged the laws which brought Alabama from its early struggling pioneer days through the "flush times" of great prosperity and rapid growth to the harsh business climate following the collapse of the State Bank and the panic of 1837.

3. Entrance Vestibule

The exterior wooden doors were narrow with raised panels and topped by a fan-shaped window. The interior of the Capital was even more impressive than the outside. Visitors walked on neatly fitted flagstones. The walls had a finish layer of plaster over the three-brick thick inner walls. A pair of elegant curved stairways led up to the legislative chambers and their galleries. Note the **wedge-shaped first step** to the right on the doorway indicating the original floor level. The **narrow opening at the bottom of the north (right) wall** is an air hole through which air flowed under the floor.

4. Rotunda

This reconstructed partial wall hints at the grandeur of this room. In this temple-like room **inset niches** and **archways** were decorated with **Greek wreaths** and **Egyptian sun-signs**. Each of the two upper floors had balconies circling the rotunda opening. Originally the roof of the cupola was covered with copper, however it developed serious leaks after the first year of use and was replaced with wooden shingles.



top of the column, or capital, carved from two pieces of sandstone joined by an iron clamp has the distinctive Ionic ends, or **volutés**, carved like ram's horns.

7. Window fragments

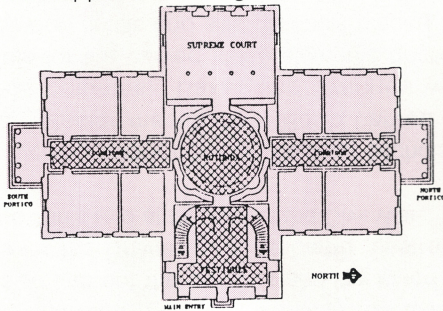
During the fire, these **arches** which surrounded the first floor windows fell inside the ruins. This display shows the center **keystones** at the top of the arch surrounded by the side **voussiors**.

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5. Supreme Court Chamber

In this room the judges of the Alabama Supreme Court made some of the most critical decisions of our early state. The ceiling of this chamber was supported by Corinthian columns. Initially the Supreme Court comprised of the circuit court judges sitting collectively. In 1832 the legislature created a three judge court. Henry W. Collier, of Tuscaloosa served on both of these courts as they met in this chamber. In this room Nichols used Corinthian columns to support the ceiling.



6. Display of carved architectural elements

Along the top of the ruins of the east portico sandstone wall fragments are displayed from the upper stories of the building. **Window lentils** carved with a Greek key design, **swags and wreaths** carved by master masons Baker and Swinney. The remains of one of the massive **columns** that stood at the side of the upper two stories is arranged to show all the elements of the **ionic column** beginning with the **circular sandstone base**, the **central shaft made of wedge-shaped bricks** covered with stucco. The

top of the column, or capital, carved from two pieces of sandstone joined by an iron clamp has the distinctive Ionic ends, or **volute**s, carved like ram's horns.

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Rainwater ran from the copper roof gutters through copper downspouts into stone splash blocks. This massive **splash block** at the corner of the building is carved from one block of sandstone.

8. North Portico

Two of the original four **Doric columns** have been re-erected. Stainless steel rods and epoxy resins join the broken pieces which were found strewn across the park and even in private gardens.

9. Comptroller's Office

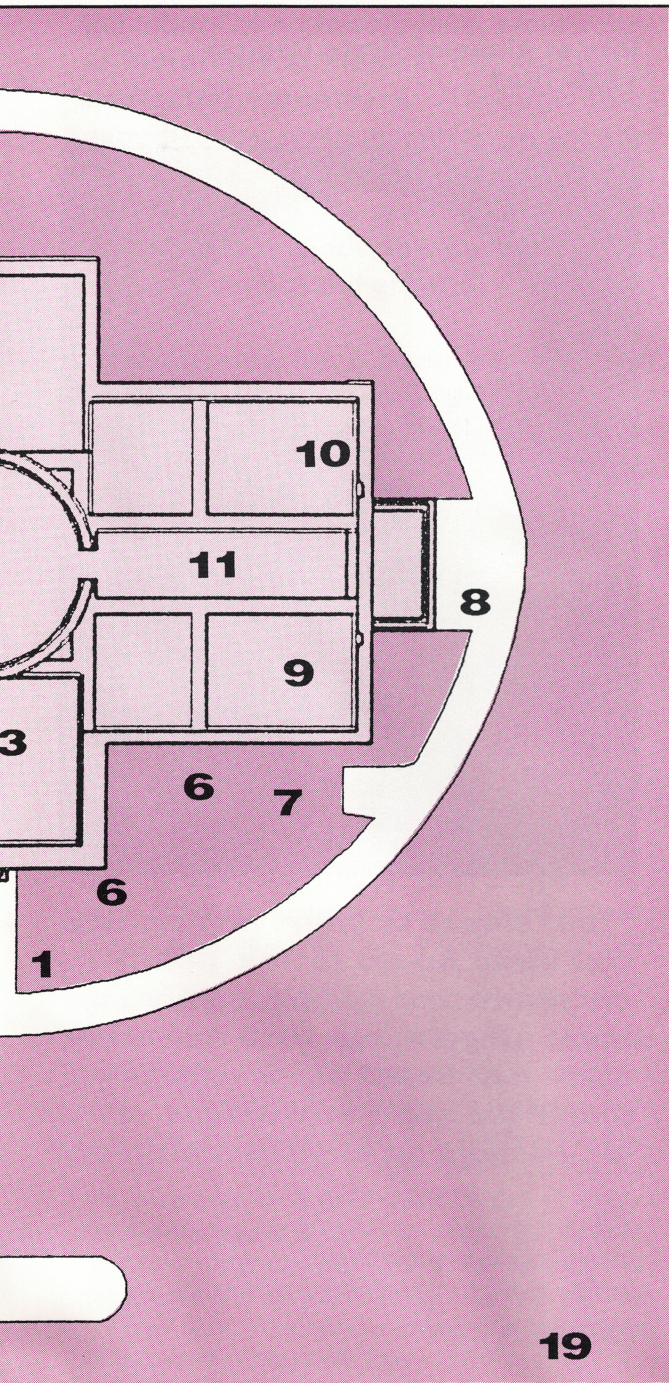
10. Office of the State Treasurer

Notice the **fireplace** embedded in the north wall which heated this office. The Senate Chamber directly above had similar fireplaces.

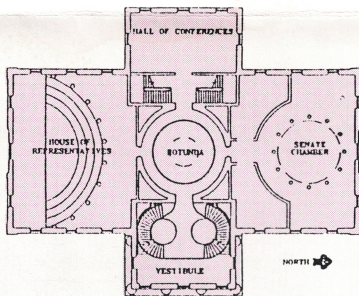
11. Senate Chamber

The Senate chamber occupied the north half of the second floor of the Capitol above the lower state offices.

When the senators moved from their temporary space in the Bell Tavern into this elegant chamber, they moved into a room designed for the free and open exchange of ideas in a public forum. The senators sat at desks arranged in two concentric circles around the center of the room. The outer circle raised above the inner. The President of the Senate's seat, on the north side of the room, was, as a newspaper of the day described, "set aside by



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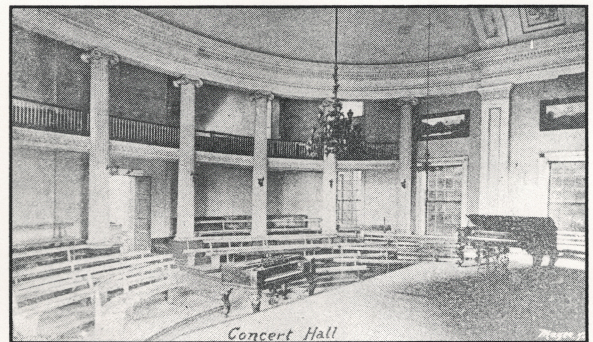
14. South portico

15. Governor's office

Nine men served as Governor of Alabama during the time the Capital was in Tuscaloosa. Plaques highlighting their accomplishments are located in the **Governor's Plaza** at the South end of the park.

16. House of Representatives

The House of Representatives occupied the south half of the second floor above the offices of the Governor and the Secretary of State.

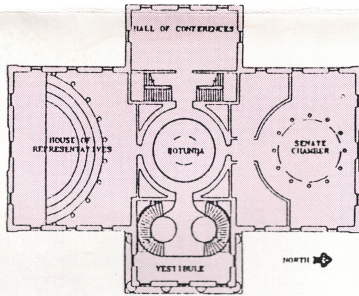


Inspired by its counterpart in Washington, D.C. the House chamber was rectangular. The third floor visitor's gallery was supported by a series of Ionic columns arranged in an arc on the north end. The elevated rostrum for the Speaker of the House at the south end of the room, stood between two more Ionic columns supporting a plaster band inscribed "Pro Patria," meaning "For Patriotism." The legislators' desks placed on a series of semicircular tiers, were designed by the architect to join together.

This stately room was the setting for one of the noblest speeches ever made in the Alabama legislature. In 1836 Eufala, Chief of the Creek Indians, bid farewell to the citizens of the emerging state as he and his people departed on their "trail of tears" for the western territories:

"I come here, brothers, to see the great house of Alabama and the men who make the laws, and to say farewell in brotherly kindness before I go to the far west, where my people are now going.... In these lands of Alabama, which have belonged to my forefathers, and where their bones lie buried, I see that the Indian fires are going out. Soon they will be cold...We leave behind our good will to the people of Alabama who build the great houses and to the men who make the laws."

Chief Eufala



rich crimson damask curtains disposed in folds and hanging festoons from the beak of a golden spread Eagle suspended above the back of the chair.”

The desks of the outer circle were separated by twelve tall Corinthian columns supporting the third floor visitor's gallery. The ceiling high above this hall was a simple shallow dome and from its center hung a “splendid Chandelier, designed to light up the whole chamber.”

12. Dormitory ruins

Traces of brick foundations mark the location of a four-story dormitory constructed in 1859 to house students of the Alabama Central Female College, affiliated with the Baptist Convention. In 1910 there were 105 young women completing their last year of high school and four years of college here.

The college offered three college degrees, A.B., B.S. and B.L. The young women studied circular trigonometry, modern languages, Latin, parliamentary law, history and science as well as music and the arts. As its 1876 catalog stated, “It is fully equipped for its noble work; affording its pupils every educational facility in literary and scientific attainment, in music and art, and ornamental branches. It is entirely free of debt, owing not one cent, and is therefore on a permanent basis”

Unfortunately the College was not insured. After the fire the high school students finished their last year at another local school while the university students were simply told not to return.

13. Office of the Secretary of State

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17. Governor's Plaza

18. McGuire Strickland House

This fine example of a raised cottage dates from the Capitol Era and was moved to the park in the early 1970s from its original Greensboro Avenue location to save it from demolition. Currently an architect's office, it is not open to the public



19. Old Tavern

This 1827 Tavern originally stood several blocks east on University Boulevard. Members of the Legislature and travelers shared the limited accommodations. It is open as a museum. A fee is charged.

20. Jail

Built in 1859 by the same contractor who built the Alabama Central Female College dormitory, this building not only housed criminals, but the jailer's family as well. It now houses the American Studies program of the Tuscaloosa City school system. It is not open to the public.

