

All's not quiet on west front

The only remaining original face of the Capitol is in danger of collapse. Battle lines are drawn over ways to save it

by Edward Gross

Not since the British burned Washington has the U.S. Capitol building been in such danger. The threat this time is not to its existence but rather to its beauty and historical integrity—at least that's the way many legislators, architects and private individuals see it.

Their concern is over an attempt to extend the west front of the 176-year-old edifice 44 feet at the center and 88 feet at the westerly courts, covering 4.5 acres. The addition would house mainly committee rooms, offices, dining facilities for the lawmakers and the public, and restrooms.

Such an extension, claim the critics, would mar the architectural splendor of the building, kill the magnificent terracing on the west side, destroy the only remnant of the original Capitol and cost at least \$45 million.

J. George Stewart, the Capitol architect, justifies this expenditure on the basis of the rickety condition of the west front, a condition so perilous that he has kept low-flying helicopters away from the building.

"I appreciate the budget conditions in the country at this time," says Stewart, "but if we can afford any expenditure for a public building, putting the national Capitol in a sound condition should come first."

Defenders of the old and true, however, have taken heart. The Senate has beaten back one proposal that would have provided \$1.75 million for a feasibility study on extending the crumbling and cracking west face. The House has already passed a bill that would authorize such an extension. All that remains is \$250,000 in an appropriations

bill for a feasibility study on a cheaper way of keeping the Capitol in one piece: restoration.

The problem is a result of sideways movement of the west front caused by expansion in summer and contraction in winter. Since the front is rigidly joined to the rest of the building, cracking and crumbling result. To counter this, Stewart's office advocates construction of a marble extension to buttress the west front and prevent its movement. Lateral movement in the new wing would be overcome by expansion joints and flat brass plates placed in its walls and ceilings to provide free play and eliminate strain.

Extension versus restoration is what the furor is all about. "Restoration would accomplish only a temporary, cosmetic effect," says Philip Roof, Stewart's executive assistant.

The only comparable alternative, Roof says, would be to start from scratch and tear down walls, floors, ceilings and all, and begin anew, this time without the original, existing sandstone, which rubs off easily when exposed to weather. Extension would cover up the susceptible sandstone with more impervious marble. Neither Roof nor Stewart are themselves architects or engineers. They use for advice outside sources, such as the consulting engineering firm of Thompson & Lichtner Co., of Brookline, Mass.

Standing in opposition to extension is the American Institute of Architects, which agrees that the west front is in danger and that something must be done fairly soon. But that something, it says, is the less costly restoration.

Francis D. Lethbridge, vice president of the AIA, contends that "extension is not needed to correct lateral thrust. The wall can resist it by other means."

Other means again consist essentially of allowing free play. This can be accomplished more cheaply by a construction joint that allows two sections independent movement, he says.

Lethbridge has more confidence in the cosmetic effect of restoration than does Roof. "We shouldn't have to worry about the (restored) west front for 100 years," says the AIA official. He envisions the restoration process as consisting of removal of old paint and replacement of damaged stones. Estimated price tag: \$10 million to \$20 million.

Both restoration and extension would employ underpinning to offset the Capitol's settling.

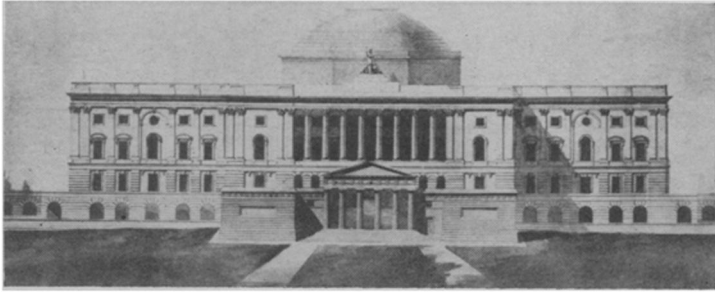
But it is not what happens under the Capitol that worries Lethbridge. It is what will be done to its exterior. An addition to the west front, besides obliterating the last visible walls of the original Capitol, would alter the sweeping and magnificent terraces which adorn that side, he says.

"We feel the building reached a certain point of integrity after the terraces were added, and after that it should have been left alone," states an AIA spokesman.

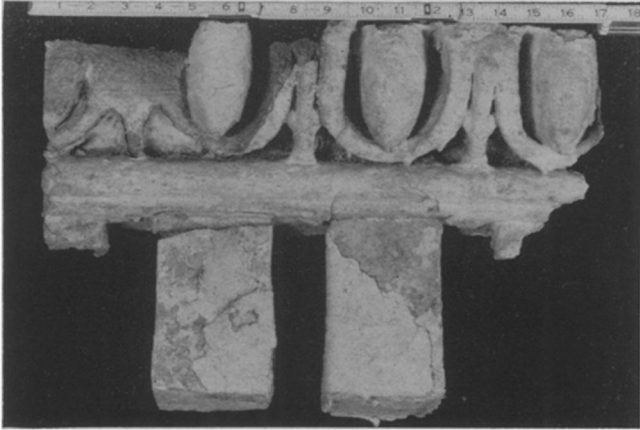
But Roof has his own authorities to cite.

"A trained eye can see the Capitol is out of proportion," he says, relaying what experts have told him. He also has in his pocket tacit approval by the American Society of Landscape

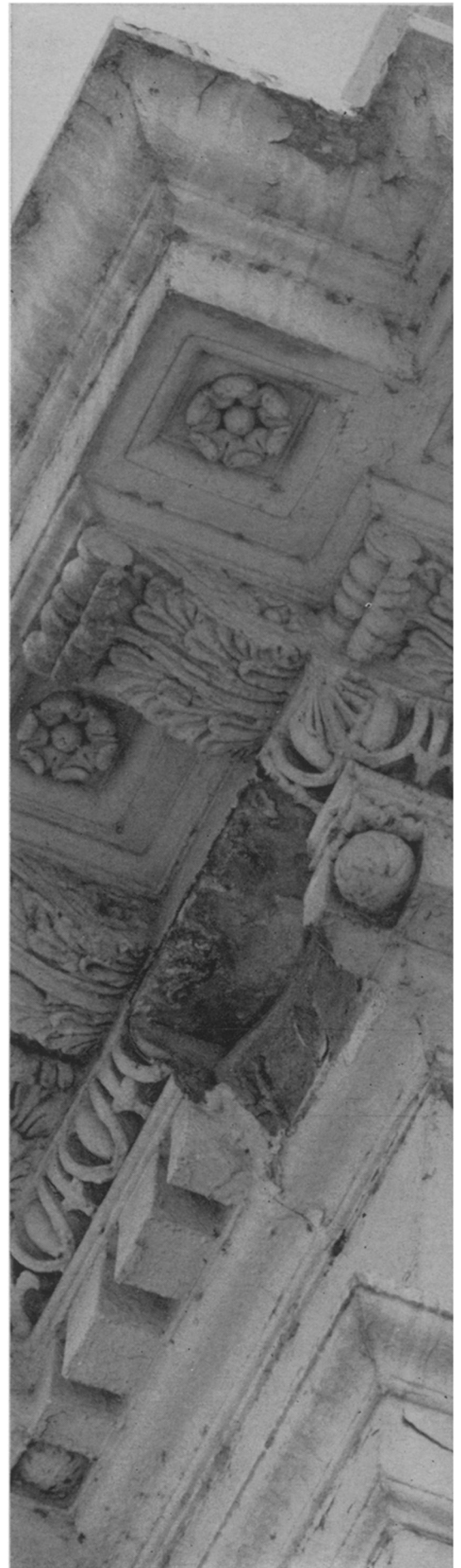




The Capitol as seen in 1811, as it exists today and how it will look if the west front is extended.



Sagging and broken stone of the west portico (far left). (left) Egg and dart motif fallen from the northwest corner (right).



Architects, which has looked at the terracing situation and made no criticism of the extension plan. Besides, he says, "We plan to leave certain portions of the old wall exposed inside," a move intended to satisfy those intent on preserving America's historical landmarks.

But there is a larger concern. The AIA is worried that extension could breed extension until the Capitol's beauty is destroyed by a proliferation of annexes. For this reason, the AIA wants to see a master plan adopted to protect the Capitol Hill area and provide for orderly and regulated growth there.

Actually, the Capitol has already undergone a series of major changes. Construction of the building and its disputed west front started in 1793 and was completed in 1800. At that time nearly the entire Government resided in it. The House of Representatives got its own side in the years between 1803 and 1811. The Capitol was damaged in the War of 1812, and work began in 1815 to restore the two sections. By 1829 they were completed, along with a wooden dome and rotunda, which constituted the central portion. The period from 1793 to 1829 marked the completion of the building as originally conceived.

The next major change occurred from 1851 to 1865, when the present Senate and House wings were added on the north and south sides and the large, familiar cast-iron dome put on.

Defenders of the extension plan point to the fact that the architectural plans for the building at the time called for further extensions of the

east and west sides because the dome was oversized for the part of the building directly below it. A 32.5-foot extension of the east front was made from 1958 to 1962, over the objections of the AIA, which has opposed all major changes in the Capitol since 1955. Although one AIA official admits the extension worked out for the best, he maintains that there "is not as much justification for the west front as the east," which was needed to support the dome.

The west front's troubles can be pinpointed to an area 40 miles south of Washington called the Aquia Creek quarry in Mount Vernon, Va. Although the original architects wanted marble for the Capitol, George Washington recommended that sandstone from the quarry be used. Marble was in short supply, and he felt the expense to the young country would have been too great. Furthermore, the Government owned the quarry. The last use of sandstone in the Capitol was in 1829.

The quality of the sandstone is at the very heart of the matter. Supporters of restoration argue that it is not inherently defective and cite the old Patent Office, whose sandstone has outlasted its marble. Extensionists say it is defective, pointing out that sandstone of varying quality from many quarries at Aquia Creek was used in both buildings.

The latest proposed extension is still in the air despite the recent setback. The next step is a joint Senate-House conference, and then approval of the compromise by both legislative houses already underway. □