



# A NEW OLD CAPITOL

Thomas Jefferson's Virginia Capitol is looking better than ever.

BY JEFF E. SCHAPIRO

**W**hen I started covering Virginia politics in 1981, I worked out of the state Capitol press room. It was, to quote Oscar Wilde, an address that inspired confidence.

Though its vaulted stucco ceiling was yellow from cigarette smoke and clutter spilled over grimy sunken-top oak desks, the cavernous, ground-floor nook I shared with other reporters was, after all, in a building designed two centuries earlier by someone whose name was usually uttered with hushed reverence: Thomas Jefferson. To a naïve, New York-born come-here, that alone elevated the significance of even the most mundane business—even a paint job—that trans-

pired behind the Capitol's gracious columned façade.

One afternoon, as I was returning from the governor's office on the Capitol's third floor, two state workers were spreading canvas tarpaulins over the granite-and-marble floor of the corridor outside the press room, preparing to apply a fresh coat of white paint to the ancient walls. One of the workers muttered something about mold, always-damp plaster and how the building's brick foundation was dissolving into red dust. Looking up at me as I squeezed by, he cracked, "You know, if the termites ever stopped holding hands, this place would probably fall down."

It hasn't.

#### **\$104.5 MILLION MAKEOVER**

But 26 years later, Mr. Jefferson's Capitol—an architectural jewel, home since 1788 to the oldest legislative body in the New World, a symbol of political promise

and defiance, and a tourist destination for a monarch and countless school children—has undergone a two-year, \$104.5 million, door-to-downspout renovation and expansion that saved it from slow ruin and prepared it for the 21<sup>st</sup> century and beyond. Virginia did so just in time for a very big party: the 400<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the founding of the commonwealth's colonial antecedent, Jamestown, the first permanent English settlement in the Americas.

The project, completed only hours before a May 3 address by Queen Elizabeth II to the General Assembly in the refurbished House chamber, was not only a closely watched exercise in historic rehabilitation, it was a hands-on tutorial for architects, engineers and Jefferson buffs, as well as a lesson in how Virginia government works—and doesn't.

Since the administration of Governor L. Douglas Wilder, from 1990 to 1994, officials

*Jeff E. Schapiro has covered the Virginia General Assembly for 27 years for the Richmond (VA) Times-Dispatch.*

million in work is on the drawing board.

"It was worth every penny that was spent," Susan Clarke Schaar, clerk of the Virginia Senate, says of the Capitol restoration. Schaar and Bruce F. Jamerson, her counterpart in the House of Delegates, supervised the project for the Capitol's principal occupant, the General Assembly. During the renovation, the legislature met paces from the Capitol in the former reading rooms of a restored New Deal-era monolith, now named for another Virginia patriot, Patrick Henry. The 68-year-old building once housed the state library and archives and Virginia Supreme Court. It is now occupied largely by the governor, his cabinet and budget staff.

The Capitol restoration, though \$5 million over budget and five months overdue, became something of a rallying point for a legislature that, since the late 1990s, has been badly splintered by ideology and party. Lawmakers have battled, sometimes for months on end, with each other and governors over taxes and spending. Twice since 2004, the state came perilously close to closing down all but essential services because the Republican-controlled legislature, divided between tax-raisers and tax-cutters, could not agree on a state budget. The second near-shutdown in 2006 could have transformed the Capitol construction site into a ghost town.

#### A WORKING MUSEUM

Perched atop a newly strengthened foundation, the Capitol now more easily blends its dual roles of office building and museum, providing such essentials as handicap access; high-speed, wireless computer networks; improved—but not intrusive—security; an energy-efficient heating and air-conditioning system; and plumbing that no longer pumps into the House chamber a foul odor that became an unfortunate metaphor for the legislative process.

As for aesthetics, hand-carved scrollwork and dentils that had been concealed over the years by paint or acoustic tile now greet the eye. A luminous shade of yellow was selected for the rotunda, providing a bright but not overbearing background for the signature treasure that looms within: Houdon's priceless marble sculpture of George Washington, the only one he ever posed for. In preparing the interior walls, bits of Jeffersonian woodwork, believed lost during early 20<sup>th</sup>-century improvements, were recovered, as were nails

#### A MAN WITH A SENSE OF HISTORY



VIRGINIA HISTORICAL SOCIETY

Were it not for Ballard T. Edwards, there might not have been a Jefferson-designed statehouse to renovate.

Edward's efforts seem all the more improbable, given that he was an African American in Richmond in the years immediately following the Civil War. This was the Reconstruction era, when—in Virginia and other southern states—white resentment over new freedoms for blacks spawned Jim Crow segregation laws.

A contractor, Edwards also was a Republican member of the House of Delegates in 1870, when tragedy befell the Capitol: A gallery collapsed in the old House chamber, killing 63 people and injuring 262 others.

The General Assembly considered demolishing the Capitol, replacing it with what legislation described as a "temple of state suitable to the esteem of this great Commonwealth."

But Edwards, who represented a district that today reaches from the industrial neighborhoods of south Richmond to the bedroom communities and outer suburbs southwest of the city, would have none of it. He convinced lawmakers that the Capitol could be restored at a cost far lower than a replacement.

Besides, Edwards argued, it had to be rebuilt to preserve a symbol of Virginia's tie to Thomas Jefferson, whose notion of freedom would not be fully experienced by blacks for nearly another century.

Edwards' efforts have gone unrecognized even longer. A resolution proposing a bust of Edwards be placed in the Old House Chamber was rejected by a House committee in 2001. Current House Majority Leader H. Morgan Griffith, is a history buff who says Edwards deserves permanent recognition, such as bronze plaque. "It's a great story that ought to be told," he says.

KARLE STEINBRENNER



Queen Elizabeth II attended ceremonies at the newly remodeled Virginia State Capitol celebrating the 400<sup>th</sup> anniversary of Jamestown, America's first permanent English settlement.

have tried to make a case for modernizing the Capitol and the deteriorating buildings inside and immediately surrounding the 13-acre Capitol Square. Many projects fell prey to the economy or politics, including a tunnel that would have linked the glass-and-steel-skinned General Assembly Building to the Capitol. But under Governor James S. Gilmore III, the state took the first steps toward sprucing up the so-called Capitol Complex. Since 1998, at least a half-dozen buildings, the Capitol and Executive Mansion among them, have been renovated. About \$250 million has already been spent; another \$400



DEPARTMENT OF GENERAL SERVICES



HILLIER ARCHITECTURE

that may have been used in the Capitol's original construction.

The House and Senate chambers, added in 1904-06, are decorated much as they were then, right down to the faux damask panels that over a century ago were fashioned by a virtually unknown Richmond sign painter hired by a long-forgotten first lady. The chambers also have been fitted with equipment evocative of a modern sports arena: Jumbo-trons on which appear roll-call votes as well as a digital image of the delegate or senator who is speaking at the time.

With the governor now working from the Patrick Henry Building, the chief executive will have only a ceremonial office at the Capitol. The suite is painted blue, the shade carefully selected. Governor Timothy M. Kaine's chief of staff, William H. Leighty, rejected an earlier shade, fearing—jokingly—that it would suggest divided loyalties: "I looked at it and said 'Redo it. No Carolina blue!'"

The contemporary now complements (some may say competes with) the classical lines of the 90,000-square-foot Capitol, which Jefferson based on the Maison Carée, a 1st-century Roman temple in Nîmes, France. Buried beneath the gently sloping south lawn of Capitol Square—invisible to passersby—is a terraced, 27,000-square-foot addition lined with Israeli limestone and accented by glass paneling that encloses two elevator shafts as well as a switchback ramp to accommodate people with disabilities.

A skylight, just above the point at which the extension connects to the Capitol, funnels in natural light. At the core of the addition, designed by Sonja Bijelic of Hillier Architecture, is an airy hall off which are a gift shop, meeting rooms for the House and Senate and their staffs, a restaurant and a press room (smaller than the one in the Capitol). The new press room's ceilings are low and unlikely to be stained by nicotine. That's because the



Capitol is smoke-free, once unheard of in a tobacco town like Richmond. Also, the new press digs are clutter-free, for now.

#### GOING UNDERGROUND

The state opted for the underground addition to preserve the "temple-on-the-hill" tableau that is synonymous with the Capitol's Jeffersonian origins. This required hauling away 27,000 tons of earth, leaving a 30-foot-deep trench in which the extension was nestled. About 10,000 tons of soil were needed to conceal the addition and restore the original contours of Capitol Hill. Landscaping recalls the beds and borders that complemented the statehouse in early-to-mid-19th century and early 20th century.

One of the few intrusions on the postcard setting is a columned entrance for visitors at the southwest foot of Capitol Hill. This portal somewhat mimics the south portico of the statehouse. Suggested by Calder Loth, a senior architectural historian for the Virginia Department of Historic Resources, the entrance was inspired by the Greek Revival springhouse at an 18th century estate on the James River.

George C. Skarneas of Hillier Architecture, the project's overseer and an architectural historian whose portfolio includes renovations of the U.S. Supreme Court, the Pennsylvania Capitol and Abraham Lincoln's summer retreat in Washington, D.C., said an above-ground extension would detract from the powerful, symbolic presence of a building that is one of only four structures designed by Jefferson. Two are likely better known than the Capitol: Jefferson's home, Monticello; and the University of Virginia. Both are about an hour's drive west of Richmond in

#### *The governor's ceremonial office.*

the leafy, rolling hills of Charlottesville.

Reflecting on how Jefferson's view of government drove his design of the building that would house it, Skarneas, a bow-tied Greek immigrant, said, "The choice he made in going to the classical was an expression, for him, of the new democratic ideal."

#### READY FOR THE NEXT 200 YEARS

The Capitol was formally reopened to the people of Virginia on May 1 in a ceremony that reflected its varied legacy.

Governor Kaine described the building as a monument to the "regal nature of popular government"—a concept launched in a restless colonial outpost that over four centuries has become a booming suburban dynamo. And those once denied a voice in Virginia's affairs, because of the color of their skin, proclaimed the Capitol open to all. Stephen R. Adkins, chief of the Chickahominy Tribe, recited a prayer in his native tongue, calling on the "great spirit, loving father of all" to guide the governor and legislature.

In the 19th century, the Capitol housed a Confederate government wedded to the preservation of slavery, and not 100 years later, Old South-style politicians who closed public schools rather than surrender to court-ordered desegregation. The Capitol's habitués have more recently included Douglas Wilder, the nation's first elected black governor, growing numbers of African-American and female legislators as well as an openly gay lawmaker who led a video tour of the restored statehouse that he posted on his website.

As House Speaker William J. Howell put it, "The Virginia state Capitol is much more than a building, or a museum or simply a place where elective officials meet. Rather, it is a splendid arena of ideas." ■