

Freedom's Cap: The United States Capitol and the Coming of the Civil War

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Review

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Gugliotta, Guy *Freedom's Cap: The United States Capitol and the Coming of the Civil War*. Hill and Wang, \$35.00 ISBN 978-0-8090-4681-2

Examining the Cross-Sectional Triumvirate that built the Capitol

During the 1850s, the United States Capitol was greatly enlarged and completely rebuilt. What resulted is the iconic structure faced with striking white marble and topped by a magnificent dome, inspired by St. Paul's in London, St. Peter's in Rome, and the Pantheon in Paris. The project was far enough advanced so that the House of Representatives moved to its new quarters in December 1857 and the Senate in January 1859—exactly where both have since remained (the dome, only half built when the war broke out, was completed in 1863). The televised annual ritual in which the president delivers his State of the Union address makes the House chamber especially familiar to modern Americans. Although the Capitol today includes added east and west fronts and a new visitor center, its overall appearance has been in place for a century and a half.

Guy Gugliotta has dual objectives. First, he wishes to assign responsibility for this monumental undertaking. A talented but fractious trio prove to have been the key players—Thomas U. Walter, the Philadelphia stonemason and architect; Montgomery C. Meigs, the military-trained engineer, best remembered as quartermaster general of the Union army; and Jefferson Davis, the U.S. senator from Mississippi. During the key years between 1853 and 1857, Davis was Secretary of War and effectively in charge of the Capitol project.

One cannot help but be impressed by the three principals, whose fiercely creative energies give this book its force. Walter and Meigs had complementary abilities--both knew how to build. Walter had constructed hundreds of houses, dozens of churches, and an impressive variety of other public buildings. Meigs, a West Pointer, had begun work on the Washington Aqueduct to bring a reliable

supply of fresh water to the capital city from Great Falls, seventeen miles upriver on the Potomac. But it was Davis who first imagined a new Capitol, and it was he who provided the essential political leverage to make sure that the two hands-on men could accomplish what they had been enlisted to achieve. Without the vision and clout of the future Confederate president, the Capitol as we know it would never have taken shape. Gugliotta breaks new ground here; the best modern biography of Davis, by William J. Cooper, Jr., barely touches the Capitol expansion of the 1850s.

Meigs designed the House and Senate chambers with glass skylights and gaslamps, along with imaginative steam-powered heating and ventilation systems. Knowing that the old House chamber's acoustics had been wretched, he made sure that sound carried well in the new spaces. Walter recognized that cast iron—easily forged, far lighter than stone, and ideal for “stationary load-bearing applications” (105)—could underpin the dome; Meigs created a sturdy timber tower topped by a mast and derrick that extended high above the floor of the rotunda and made it possible to winch the prefabricated pieces of cast iron into position as the dome finally took shape. One would like to learn that Walter and Meigs maintained a good working relationship with each other, but that was not the case at all: the “competitive undercurrent in their relationship” gave way to “a prolonged display of small-minded selfishness by both men” (187). Walter and Meigs ultimately were reconciled, but Davis, alas, was irrevocably estranged from everyone in Washington and never laid eyes on the completed Capitol.

Gugliotta's second objective is to explore the daunting paradoxes—how it was that a nation on the verge of rupture could so tangibly strive to affirm its cohesion, and how it was that the very symbol of American nationality came about at the behest of the person who soon afterwards tried to create a separate southern nation. Gugliotta surmises that the Capitol was “one of the few remaining national enterprises that could unite rather than divide Congress” during the 1850s, when North-South disagreements over slavery increasingly paralyzed the political system (164). It appealed to those such as New York senator William H. Seward, who wanted to show that “this union was not to be dissolved” (244).

Davis, who was friends with Seward, substantially shared these sentiments. From his post in the War Department, he shot down a suggestion that he use his office to establish “a southern military academy.” Any such step, he retorted, would tend “to create and increase sectional jealousies.” Remembering his West

Point apprenticeship, he thought it best for young men “from all parts of the country” to build friendships with each other (222). One of the few shortcomings of this otherwise splendid volume is its tendency to impose on the actors of the 1850s an ability to foresee what lay ahead; thus, Davis knew that he “would have to choose” between his regional and national allegiances (311). Here, hindsight may mislead us.

Freedom’s Cap is a double entendre. It refers to the dome itself, and to its wartime completion. “We are strong enough yet,” one Congressman insisted in 1862, “to put down this rebellion and to put up this our Capitol at the same time” (387). But *Freedom Triumphant in War and Peace* is also the name given by the sculptor Thomas Crawford to the colossal twenty-foot tall statue he designed to stand atop the dome. It depicts a female figure with an exotic headdress—the head of an eagle amid a sheaf of feathers. This was not Crawford’s original choice. *Freedom Triumphant* originally wore a liberty cap, “the symbol from classical antiquity of a manumitted slave” (6). Jefferson Davis looked askance at the original, and so it was changed.

Daniel W. Crofts is working on a history of the would-be Thirteenth Amendment of 1861. His most recent book is A Secession Crisis Enigma: William Henry Hurlbert and “The Diary of a Public Man.”