

THE MAJESTY OF CAPITOL HILL

THOMAS B. GROOMS
PHOTOGRAPHS BY TAYLOR J. LEDNUM



PELICAN PUBLISHING COMPANY
Gretna 2005

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Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data

Grooms, Thomas B.

The majesty of Capitol Hill / Thomas B. Grooms ; photographs by Taylor J. Lednum.— 1st ed.
p. cm.

Includes bibliographical references.

ISBN 9781589802285 (hardcover : alk. paper)

1. Architecture—Washington (D.C.)—Guidebooks. 2. Historic buildings—Washington (D.C.)—
Guidebooks. 3. Capitol Hill (Washington, D.C.)—Buildings, structures, etc.—Guidebooks. 4.
Washington (D.C.)—Buildings, structures, etc.—Guidebooks. 5. Capitol Hill (Washington,
D.C.)—Guidebooks. 6. Washington (D.C.)—Guidebooks. I. Lednum, Taylor J. II. Title.

NA735.W3G76 2005

720'.9753—dc22

2004017545



Printed in Singapore

Published by Pelican Publishing Company, Inc.
1000 Burmaster Street, Gretna, Louisiana 70053

To Rodger

His vision stirred me to share my love of Capitol Hill.

and

To the Capitol Hill Restoration Society

*Its leadership and commitment have given us a
community to cherish.*





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Introduction

There are two Capitol Hills in Washington, D.C. They share the same geography and the same historic roots, but they are worlds apart. One is a high rise in the center of the city with an imposing building perched on the edge, its majestic white dome recognized around the world as the symbol of democracy, power, and politics—the home of the U.S. Congress. The other is a quiet, low-rise neighborhood comprised of eight thousand dwellings that fan out to the east of this famous building. These structures comprise the fourteen-block area of the Capitol Hill Historic District, the largest Victorian historic district in the country. The area is a virtual museum of nineteenth-century American architectural styles. This book is about that historic neighborhood.

For residents of “the Hill,” the Capitol is merely a backdrop to their everyday lives. For them, the center of the community is a half-mile east in a one-story red brick Victorian structure with distinctive bull’s eye windows and a hipped roof—the Eastern Market. “Hillites” have come here for more than a century to buy their fresh





meat, fish, and vegetables while conversing with their neighbors about events of the day—both large and small. For some, Saturday and Sunday mornings are an opportunity to indulge in the market's famous blueberry pancakes, shop at the surrounding specialty stores, and wander through the large weekend flea market.

Capitol Hill is a neighborhood that has been more than two hundred years in the making. While it has had many famous and powerful residents, including Thomas Jefferson and Abraham Lincoln, the community has been shaped largely by the middle class—artisans, craftsmen, civil servants, and merchants. George Washington and the city's French designer Maj. Peter (Pierre) L'Enfant assumed that the commercial and residential core would expand east from the Capitol and southeast to the Eastern Branch of the Potomac River (now the Anacostia River) and Navy Yard, which was established in 1799, two miles away. They envisioned a grand and fashionable eastern city built around business activity and this waterfront section of Washington. But land speculators thwarted these plans by grossly inflating the price of property around the Capitol. Furthermore by 1820 deforestation and tobacco farming in the watershed led to the silting up of the river, making it unusable for deep-draft vessels. So the city's development and fortunes turned northwest to the port of Georgetown





along the Potomac River and the area of the city between the Capitol and the White House, which by 1835 was served by the Baltimore and Ohio Railroad. As a result, Capitol Hill remained largely undeveloped until after the Civil War.

Initially, two small areas were settled in the early 1800s once the nation's capital officially moved to Washington. One was by the Capitol. Houses near the building were occupied primarily by the English, Scottish, and American (white and black) builders, artisans, and craftsmen who worked on constructing the grand edifice, which was begun in 1793. The other group of residents clustered around the Navy Yard and nearby Marine Barracks. Small frame buildings, brick boarding houses and taverns, and a couple of mansions linked the two settlements by muddy unpaved roads and were the beginnings of historic Capitol Hill. By 1814 when the British invaded Washington and burned the Capitol, White House, and other public buildings, the Hill boasted a modest community that included an outdoor market, churches, hotels, taverns, and even cemeteries. It also had another ethnic group, as Italians had been brought to Washington by President Jefferson to play in the Marine Band.

New construction after the war gave the neighborhood a more settled look in the 1820s. By 1826, after more than three decades,





the Capitol, with its wood and copper sheathed dome by Charles Bulfinch, was finally finished. Very little changed until the late 1840s with the influx of German craftsmen and Irish laborers. Many of the newcomers found jobs at the Navy Yard. Even more worked on the expansion of the Capitol building, which began in 1851 and continued for fifteen years.

Waves of post-Civil War speculation and new construction gradually turned the Hill into what exists today. Many speculative developers built thousands of brick row houses to accommodate the city's burgeoning civil service workforce. Like today, the Hill's proximity to downtown and easy access to public transportation—horse-drawn and, later, motorized streetcars—increased the mobility of residents and made the Hill an attractive place to live.

The unifying factor in the social history of the Hill is that it has never lost its diversity. It has experienced in full measure the various waves of immigration to America's shores since 1791. One of the last came at the end of the nineteenth century when Eastern European Jews seeking freedom from persecution found their way to the Eighth Street, SE, commercial corridor now known as Barracks Row. In the early 1950s, many African Americans who had been displaced by massive urban renewal in southwest Washington also relocated to Capitol Hill. Today, the Hill retains its middle-class character.





Nowhere else in Washington is L'Enfant's original street plan better preserved than on Capitol Hill. The structures within the historic district reflect more than a century of architectural styles: Federal, Italianate, Second Empire, Romanesque, Queen Anne, and Classical Revival. Compared to in-town neighborhoods in other East Coast cities, Capitol Hill has a unique appearance: wide streets, bay fronts, iron-fenced front yards, ubiquitous red brick fired from iron-rich clay, elaborate ornamental pressed-brick facades adjacent to simple, unadorned frame buildings. Overall, a feeling of spaciousness is one of the key attractions of Capitol Hill. Many row houses are built in small groups while others occupy long, uninterrupted blocks. Imaginative and varied facades reveal the aspirations of the nineteenth-century middle-class residents. The Capitol Hill community enjoyed an amount of stability and security that was unusual in the late 1800s, and its architecture faithfully reflects the conservative values and qualities of its inhabitants.

Most Capitol Hill houses are row houses, with common walls and either front or rear gardens. Builders, often neighborhood residents, constructed most of the houses using architectural pattern books that illustrated various styles and instructed how to achieve the desired effect. By the time most of the existing houses were built after 1850, two innovations—cheap, machine-made nails



and mass production of standard sizes of lumber—had radically altered the building process. No longer did the construction of a house depend on the skills and knowledge of a master housewright. Building supply catalogs listed everything from iron roof systems and cast iron fronts to decorative window glass. The growth of nineteenth-century technology made variety and machine reproduction possible and brought architectural refinement within the financial means of a large segment of the population.

One of the earliest laws that affected the nature of Capitol Hill houses was George Washington's Wall Proclamation of 1791. This act allowed each builder to put one half of his wall on the adjoining property line and encouraged the building of row houses. The early District of Columbia commissioners had some exacting standards for building row houses. They wished, for example, to minimize fire hazards and so encouraged building brick houses. They soon realized, however, that "mechanics" and other workers could not afford the brick houses, so the commissioners decided to allow frame houses to be built as well.

The iron-fenced front yards of Capitol Hill are the result of another law. When L'Enfant laid out the city of Washington, he planned that the average street would be at least one hundred feet wide. But after the Civil War, the tremendous cost of paving such





wide streets led the city government to enact the “Parking Act” in 1870. An owner was allowed to fence or enclose all of the unused space in front of his house. And so, the front gardens of Capitol Hill houses are usually on public property.

A year later, the City Council decided to allow owners to build certain projections such as bays and towers four feet beyond the property line. Porches and steps could extend even farther onto public property. Towers, bays, and porches soon became common features of Capitol Hill houses—both the new and “modernized” older ones.

Battles have been fought and won by the community over highways that would have split the Hill, high rises that would have destroyed its streetscape, local government efforts to demolish the Eastern Market, and the federal government’s plans to turn East Capitol Street—the center of the Hill—into a boulevard of government offices. A multitude of other threats could have destroyed the Hill if the community had not been vigilant and united.

Today, a person can tour Capitol Hill, admire the lovely old homes and colorful little fenced yards, delight in the pleasures of urban living, and enjoy the rich heritage of this beloved neighborhood in the shadow of the great Capitol.



