

Capital without the Capitol



photo by Frank Engler

Seeing Richmond in the Regency era is still possible even though the State Capitol is closed for renovation.

Capitol Square and Court End contain some of the greatest landmarks of one of the great cities of the Federal era, Richmond. Within a few blocks one can still experience on foot the entire feeling for what life was like when America became a new country.

By Garland Pollard



When Tim Kaine became Virginia's 70th Governor this January, it was the first time since Colonial times that a Virginia governor was inaugurated in Williamsburg. Traditionally, every four years on inauguration day, the ceremony is held outside in Richmond's Capitol Square.

But this year, owing both to the renovation and expansion of the capitol and in commemoration of the 400th anniversary of Virginia, Kaine was inaugurated in Colonial Williamsburg in its reconstructed colonial Capitol. There was a potent reason for this change—Richmond's Capitol Square is completely dug up for a once-a-century renovation. The renovation will restore the building's historic elements, rebuild its deteriorated parts and increase the capacity for visitors and visitor services. While the renovation is much needed (though not without controversy), it means that the Capitol building,



photos by Ashley Hutchins

FROM TOP: Washington Monument, Governor's Mansion, Stonewall Jackson Monument at Capitol Square.

designed by Thomas Jefferson and one of the greatest treasures of American architectural history, will be closed to visitors for the year.

Virginia is unique among states for many things; one often overlooked Virginia feature is that you can visit three different iterations of American capital cities. There is the preserved 17th-century capital, Jamestown (both actual and reconstructed), the preserved 18th-century Colonial capital, Williamsburg, and a preserved 19th-century capital, Richmond.

When we think of a city of the Regency or Federal era, we think of places like Bath, England, or Philadelphia,

Pennsylvania. But after the move of the capital from Williamsburg to Richmond, Virginians created one of the nation's first great cities of the Federal period, the dates of which are around 1790 to 1830. The era was a bold time, when Lewis and Clark went west and Robert Fulton invented the steamship, and all things old and classical were revered.

Much of the popular image of the era's style was defined during the James Madison years, where Dolley Madison brought a sense of fashion and style to a country desperate for new icons. Fashion became much more modern, with tailcoats and high boots on men. Women's clothes harked back to the classic, with long, flowing dresses in bright colors. Internationally, Napoleon and Empress Josephine were style leaders; that version of the style was called Empire. In the mother country, Britain, ruled by the young George, who acted as Prince Regent to take the place of his mad father George III, the style became known as the Regency Era. Whether you call it Regency, Federal or Empire (and there were different nuances and dates in each country), it was one of the most sumptuous periods in history. Luckily, Richmond boasts one of the greatest architectural collections from the period anywhere.

The Federal era was also a time of great change, as citizens of the old world and new world embraced the styles of ancient Greece, Rome and Egypt for their homes and public buildings. It was also a time of intellectual ferment. The United States had just moved past the ineffective Articles of Confederation, and Richmond was at the center of law, fashion and social consciousness. While the young American nation was to be at a second war with England by 1812, England's fashion was all the rage. Virginians, like the English of Jane Austen's era, flocked to resort baths and took up wearing tailcoats and high boots. It was a time of intrigue as well. George Wythe, Thomas Jefferson's mentor, who moved to Richmond from Williamsburg, was poisoned by family. And Virginia's Governor Smith died in a horrible theater fire in the period, commemorated by the construction of Monumental Church.

Today, Richmond has a remarkable number of surviving structures from that early 19th-century era, from early in the period (the 1788 John Marshall House) to late in the period, like the Medical College of Virginia's **1845 Egyptian Building**. And the examples here are designed by the nation's best architects. U.S. Capitol architect Thomas U. Walter designed what is now **Hunton Hall**; Robert Mills, architect of the Washington

Monument, designed **Monumental Church** and the **Brockenbrough House**, which became the **White House of the Confederacy**.

Each of these buildings had intimate connections with state government; lucky for Richmond, they are all still around. Some, like the **Wickham House** and **White House of the Confederacy**, are open every day. Others, like the **Executive Mansion**, are open at special times. And then there are the rest, like the **Stewart Lee House**, owned by the Home Builders Association of Virginia, and the **Beers House**, which is part of MCV Foundation; both are private offices that are open on special days or by advance appointment. In those cases, an interested visitor should remember that they are first private work offices and are not equipped for tours or nosy visitors. That being said, we don't know of any respectably dressed person who has been turned away from a picture or peek into the lobby, if they asked nicely. In addition, there are many notable late 19th- and 20th-century buildings in this area, so many in fact that we have not listed them here.

Capitol Square is always the first destination of the pilgrimage into Federal Richmond. **The Capitol**, built from 1785 to 1792, was the first great neoclassical revival building in the new United States, and was the work of Thomas Jefferson.



temporarily located near the George Washington statue. Sadly, the public observation gallery for the General Assembly, which will reopen when the Capitol reopens, will not be open this year. But tourists who are interested in seeing the world's oldest continuous legislative body at work can go next door to the General Assembly building at 9th and Broad. There, the session will be televised on closed circuit television. While this isn't as exciting as being there in person, the General Assembly building is where all the action happens with lobbyists, delegates, senators, pages, staffers and other hangers-on. It's living history of the best kind.

Just east of the Capitol is the **1813 Executive Mansion**, home of Virginia's governors. Open on special days, the mansion was added onto by 20th-century architect Duncan Lee. Behind the Executive Mansion is the **1853 Morsons Row**, in the Italianate style. These state offices are evidence of what the residences of Richmond looked like before many were destroyed. The **1849 Washington Monument** shows George Washington on horse, with Revolutionary figures below and allegorical figures at eye level.



FROM TOP: City Hall, St. Paul's Church.



The **1824 Bell Tower** across Capitol Square was once the office of the lieutenant governor and is now a tourist information office of Virginia Tourism Corporation. It warned of the Gabriel Prosser slave insurrection and has rung thousands of times since. It is a focal point of Franklin Street, which begins there; the **1844 Stewart-Lee House**, in the Greek Revival style, was the home of Gen. Robert E. Lee and family during the Civil War. While not open for tours, the Home Builders Association of Virginia is used to folks peeking at the front.

A block north at 9th and Grace streets is the **1844 St. Paul's Church**, where King Edward VII and Jefferson Davis, among thousands of others, worshipped. Done in the Greek Revival style, it is known for its Tiffany windows and Lenten luncheons, the latter of which are open to the public during Lent and feature great speakers and even better lunches served by the congregation. Check in at the church office. Across the street, see the **1835 St. Peter's Church**, which was once the Cathedral of the Catholic Diocese and is now a parish.

The neighborhood north of Capitol Square is Court End, which houses some of Richmond's finest residences of Richmond notables. At the corner of 10th and Broad is the **1788 John Marshall House**, the only surviving 18th-century house in this part of the city. Open daily by APVA Preservation Virginia, it was the home of Chief Justice John Marshall and still contains many Marshall family antiques.

Here is an artist's digital rendering of the New Capitol Visitor's Center upon its completion in late 2006.



Old City Hall.

On Broad Street, the remaining residence is the **1839 Beers House**, which houses the MCV Foundation at 1228 East Broad. Originally with a gable roof, its top was turned Italianate in 1870. Next door is **Monumental Church**, built as an Episcopal church in 1814 to commemorate the 1811 theater fire at the site. Designed by Robert Mills, the first great American architect, it is under restoration and open by appointment. Just behind Monumental Church is the **1845 Egyptian Building**, the wonder building by Philadelphia architect Thomas S. Stewart. A rare example of the Egyptian Revival, this first building of the Medical College of Virginia harks right back to the Napoleonic fascination with all things Egypt. It is still in use by VCU/MCV. In the next block west is Hunton Hall, the former **1841 First Baptist Church**. Designed by Thomas U. Walter, the first architect of the United States Capitol, it is now used as a cafeteria by VCU/MCV.

North on Clay Street, the **1846 Maupin Maury House** at the northwest corner of 11th and Clay was “where” Matthew Fontaine Maury performed his research on torpedoes, by legend in a tub there. The “where” is in quotes because the house was moved across the street to make room for a VCU/MCV hospital office building. Directly across East Clay is the **1812 Wickham House**, open to the public as part of the Valentine Richmond History Center. It is admired for its subtle neoclassical features; the stair is beloved, as are the parlors. Next door is an 1840 house rebuilt in 1952, the Bransford Cecil House. Across the street are the **1857 Grant House** and **1810 Benjamin Watkins Leigh House**, now in the Italianate style.

One should end the neoclassical Federal tour with the grandest. North one block from the Wickham house is the grandest of the grand Richmond houses, the **1818 White House of the Confederacy**, built as a private home for Dr. John Brockenbrough. Regular tours are offered by the Museum of the Confederacy, which runs it as part of its museum complex. Designed by Robert Mills, the house is a National Landmark not only for its history as the home of Jefferson Davis during the Civil War, but also as a landmark in its own right. Architectural historian Robert Winthrop calls it the first great monumental portico on a Richmond house. But what it became famous for was its connection to the Confederacy, for it was there that Jefferson Davis lived during the war, and it was there that Lincoln sat at the desk of President Jefferson Davis.



FROM TOP: Egyptian Building, Museum of the Confederacy, White House of the Confederacy.



Above It All on the Observation Deck

With the renovation of New City Hall at 9th and Broad streets, the observation deck at the top reopened last fall. It is open 8 a.m. to 5 p.m., free, and offers visitors a view of all of Capital Square and Court End. New City Hall was a 1971 building; beginning in 2003, it was renovated as the marble exterior cladding began to fall off.

ABOVE: View of Church Hill and MCV West Hospital from Deck.

Where to Eat

In the Court End and Capitol Square area, there are numerous spots for lunch, though fewer for dinner. At the Library of Virginia at 9th and Broad, and at New City Hall across the street, there are lunchtime eateries. Numerous state buildings hold cafeterias, though some are off limits without signing in at a guard station. There is also a McDonald's and an Alpine Food Café in the VCU/MCV Gateway Building on East Marshall Street. And don't forget the Main MCV Hospital cafeteria, where full meals are offered. While it's not a culinary experience, it's a great respite from the chill outside, and one of the few places to feel the buzz and excitement of a major inner-city hospital. And there's the Skull and Beans coffee kiosk at Tompkins McCaw Library, its name a nod to the Skull and Bones restaurant, once famous at MCV. Also, in historic Hunton Hall, look for the Campus Room and Hunton's Café Express.

While the offerings aren't as plentiful as they were when the whole 6th Street Marketplace Mall was running, the remaining Food Court at 6th and Marshall streets provides a few options. In the next block, the Richmond Marriott also offers both the Onyx and Tripplett's Lounge and Blue Fire Steakhouse, as well as Starbucks.

Downtown office and Medical College staffers swear by Wickham's Garden Café, which sits in the garden of the wonderful Wickham House, part of the Valentine Richmond History Center. It is open daily from 8 to 3 at 1015 East Clay; locals sneak in the side gate nearest MCV.