



U.S. CAPITOL
Visitor Center

Frequently Asked Questions

Q: When did Congress ceremonially break ground for the Capitol Visitor Center?

A: On June 20, 2000, members of the Capitol Preservation Commission, the guiding board of Congressional leaders who spearheaded the Capitol Visitor Center initiative on behalf of the entire U.S. Congress, ceremonially broke ground to signal the beginning of the project.

Q: When did construction of the Capitol Visitor Center begin?

A: Actual construction work began in 2002 after a major reassessment of the project following the events of September 11, 2001. Excavation of the East Front Plaza began in August, 2002. In the fall of 2003, excavation was essentially complete and build-up of the Visitor Center structure began. In July 2008, the Architect of the Capitol's Fire Marshal issued a Certificate of Occupancy allowing for personnel to begin occupying the facility.

Q: Exactly how big is the Capitol Visitor Center?

A: The Visitor Center, including new spaces for the House and Senate, encompasses 580,000 square feet, approximately three-quarters the size of the Capitol, which stands at 775,000 square feet. The footprint of the Visitor Center is larger than the footprint of the Capitol by 18,000 square feet. The largest previous addition to the Capitol in its 215-year history, was the construction of the new House and Senate Wings in the 1850s. Combined, the wings comprise 330,000 square feet. Therefore, the Visitor Center is, by far, the largest addition to the Capitol in its history. New books about the Capitol will reflect the building as being 1.35 million square feet.

Q: What is the total cost of the Capitol Visitor Center?

A: The overall project cost was \$621 million. The duration of construction was approximately six years, from August 2002 through November 2008.

Q: Was anything of historical significance discovered during excavation?

A: Nothing of a significant historical nature was discovered during excavation. The project architect, RTKL, hired an archaeological consultant to research the history of the grounds and to conduct surveys of Capitol Hill, formerly Jenkin's Hill, prior to the start of construction. The research showed that the Capitol Grounds were occupied to some extent by sub-tribes of the Algonquin Indians during colonial days, but research indicated that most of the tribal activities occurred closer to the Potomac River. Previous excavation work may have removed materials from earlier eras. In 1874, Olmsted called for the removal of 240,000 cubic yards of material from the East Capitol Grounds in order to lay a more fertile bed of soil. Later, in 1958-59, much of the area near the Capitol was excavated during the East Front Extension project, which extended the East Front of the Capitol 32.5 feet.

Q: Will there still be staff-led tours of the Capitol?

Yes, Congressional staff will continue to lead tours of the Capitol. A new program is being offered which provides Member office staffers who give tours required training on life safety and evacuations, tour logistics, and historical interpretation.

Q: Isn't this really a bunker to protect Members of Congress?

A: The decision to locate the Visitor Center below ground was to preserve the historic views of the Capitol and, to the extent possible, restore and revive the pedestrian-friendly historic landscape designed by Frederick Law Olmsted in 1874. Putting a three-story structure on the East or West Front of the Capitol was not an option. Six skylights (including two that measure 30 by 70 feet) provide direct, natural light, and connect visitors visually to the picturesque Capitol dome.

Q: What special security features were built into the Capitol Visitor Center?

A: Improving the security of the Congress, the Capitol, and visitors was one of the fundamental goals driving the construction of the Capitol Visitor Center.

The fatal shootings of two U.S. Capitol Police officers in July 1998 and the events of September 11, 2001 underscored the degree to which the Capitol and its occupants are at risk. Therefore, Congress directed the Architect of the Capitol to design and construct a visitor center to “provide greater security for all persons working in or visiting the United States Capitol and to provide a more convenient place in which to learn of the work of Congress.”

The Visitor Center will now provide a secure public environment to welcome and manage the millions of visitors annually and protect the Capitol Building, its occupants, and guests.

Q: How will the history of enslaved labor in the construction of the Capitol be conveyed to visitors?

A: The issue of enslaved labor in the construction of the U.S. Capitol is presented in a number of ways in the Capitol Visitor Center. In the Exhibition Hall, reading rails include text accompanied by images that discuss the contributions of enslaved laborers who cleared grounds, quarried stone, sawed timber, and labored on the Capitol's structure. Reading rails around the plaster model for the Statue of Freedom highlight the contributions of Philip Reid, an enslaved laborer whose talents were instrumental in the casting of the Statue of Freedom.

In addition, the importance of enslaved laborers is discussed in the 13-minute orientation film that will be shown to all visitors at the beginning of their tour of the Capitol. Educational information on the role of enslaved labor is also incorporated into the script for guide-led tours and staff-led tours of the Capitol. The topic also will be covered in a brochure that will be available in the Visitor Center, and it will be included in the Capitol Visitor Center's on-line exhibition on its Website.

Q: Why did you remove statues from the Capitol? Will the statues in Emancipation Hall be rotated back into the Capitol and other statues moved out to the Capitol Visitor Center?

A: The Joint Committee on the Library approved moving 24 statues from various locations in the Capitol to the Visitor Center, which was designed as an extension of the Capitol, not a separate facility. The plan's goal is to make these sculptures more accessible to the visiting public and help alleviate overcrowding.

Overcrowding has been an issue in Statuary Hall since the 1930s, and Congress determined in 1933 that only one statue from each state should be placed in Statuary Hall, and that the others would be given prominent locations in designated areas and corridors of the Capitol. With the addition of the Capitol Visitor Center, it was decided that the statues would be rearranged again in order to further highlight and feature this unique collection, which represents the 50 United States and its citizens.

The statues selected to be moved are those that were most recently donated to the collection, and represent the diversity of our country. There is no plan to rotate the statues in Emancipation Hall or move other statues from the Capitol into the Visitor Center.

Q: Where will buses drop off visitors who wish to tour the Capitol?

A: Tour buses will continue to be allowed to drop off visitors on the West Front of the Capitol. For people with mobility issues, there are shuttles driven by Visitor Assistants available to take them to the Visitor Center entrance at the East Front. City buses, including Metrobus, will be able to drop off passengers at the East Front near the Visitor Center entrance.

Q: Are there storage facilities at the Visitor Center for the items that are not allowed in the Capitol?

A: There are no storage facilities at the Visitor Center for prohibited items. It is therefore critical that we communicate to visitors what will not be allowed in the facility. Our Website, www.visitthecapitol.gov, will be an essential tool to communicate this and other important visitor information. The list of prohibited items is included in the U.S. Capitol Visitor Guide brochure.

Q: Does our national motto, “In God We Trust,” appear in the Capitol Visitor Center? What about other religious references?

A: Yes, our national motto does appear in the Capitol Visitor Center in the House Theater exhibit. References to religion and faith are included in the context of several historic exhibits, and several religious items appear in the displays.

Some examples include Article 3 of the Northwest Ordinance in its entirety; a copy of the Pledge of Allegiance and the prayer said at the opening of the current Congress; a copy of the Bible used to administer the oath of office to Senators until 1882; portraits of the first House and Senate chaplains; information about religious services regularly held in the Capitol in the 1800s, and an unaltered display of the U.S. Constitution highlighting the First Amendment which established our country’s right to the freedom of religion.