

Nebraska State Capitol Building

A LOOK AT THE PAST/A CHRONOLOGY

"The Capitol of a state is the outward sign of the character of its people. Their respect for its traditions and history, their belief in its importance and worth and their love of its fair name—let the new Capitol be its symbol." — Nebraska State Capitol Commission (1920)



West front of first State Capitol in Lincoln.

The first State Capitol Building in Lincoln was built in 1868-9 and served until 1881. The cost of the building was $75,817.59.

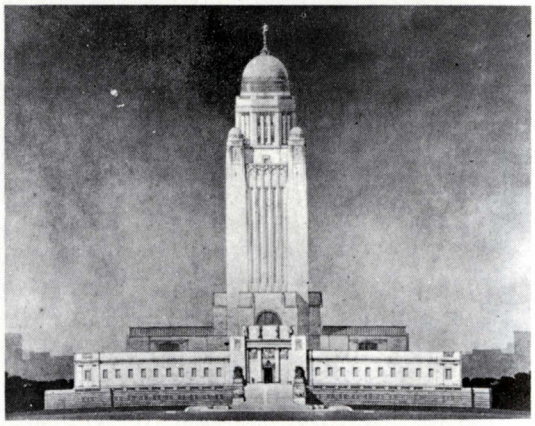


South front of second State Capitol in Lincoln.

The second Capitol Building was completed in 1886. The total cost was $759,513. By 1919 the Building was obviously no longer capable of providing enough space for the needs of the State Government. In 1919 the Nebraska Legislature initiated proceedings to build a new Capitol as a useful memorial to Nebraska soldiers killed in action during the Great War.

Culminating twenty years of discussion, House Roll Number 3 was passed in February, 1919, and approved by Governor Samuel R. McKelevie. The bill created a Capitol Commission empowered to erect a new Statehouse. The commission began by organizing a competition to select an architect from the most prominent firms in the state and nation.

Eighteen months later, on June 26, 1920, the Commission announced the jury's final selection of Bertram Grosvenor Goodhue of New York from a distinguished list of architects. The plans submitted were remarkably unlike those of other competitors, whose plans remained primarily in the traditional style of the United States Capitol.



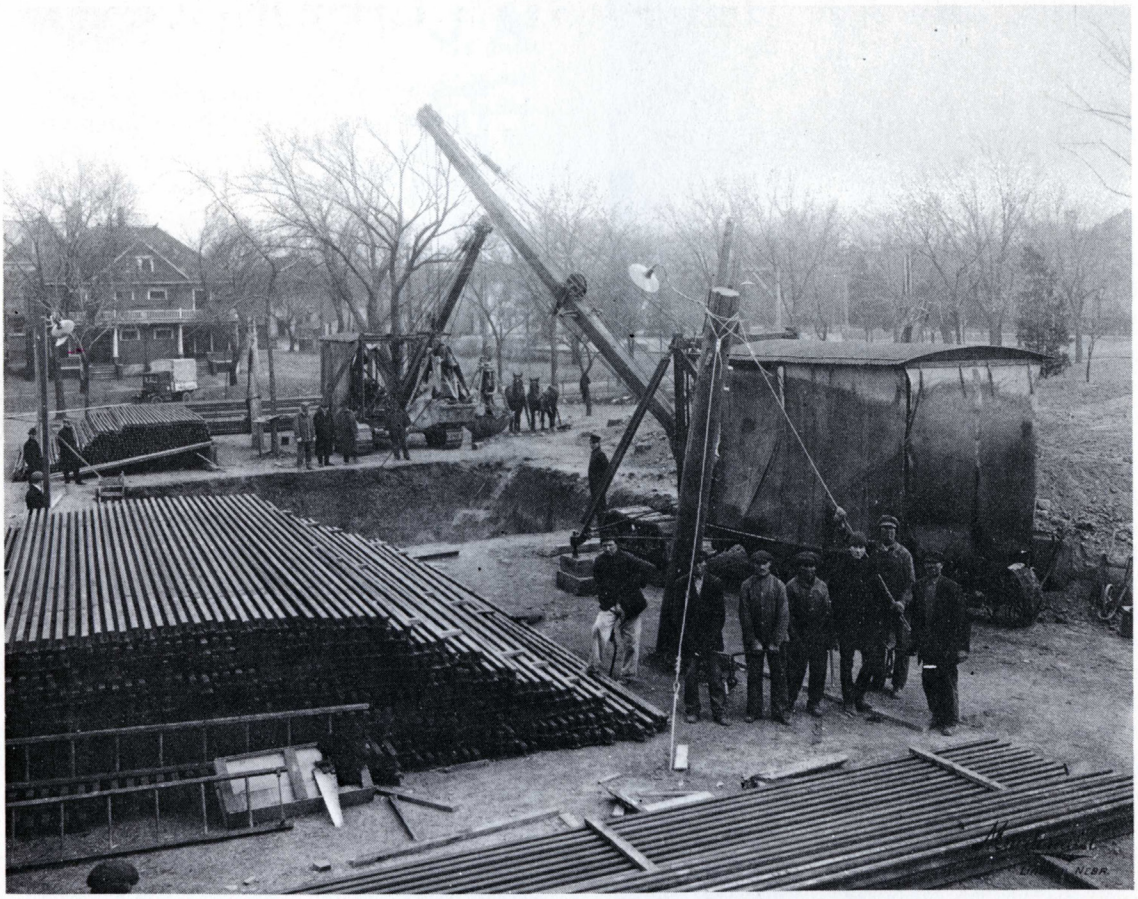
North Entrance; architect's sketch

It was the first example of a State Capitol with a tower containing usable space as a major feature. The design was considered strikingly modern by Goodhue's contemporaries and influenced the course of architectural design in the twentieth century.

The plan for the construction of a new Statehouse is as remarkable as the design.

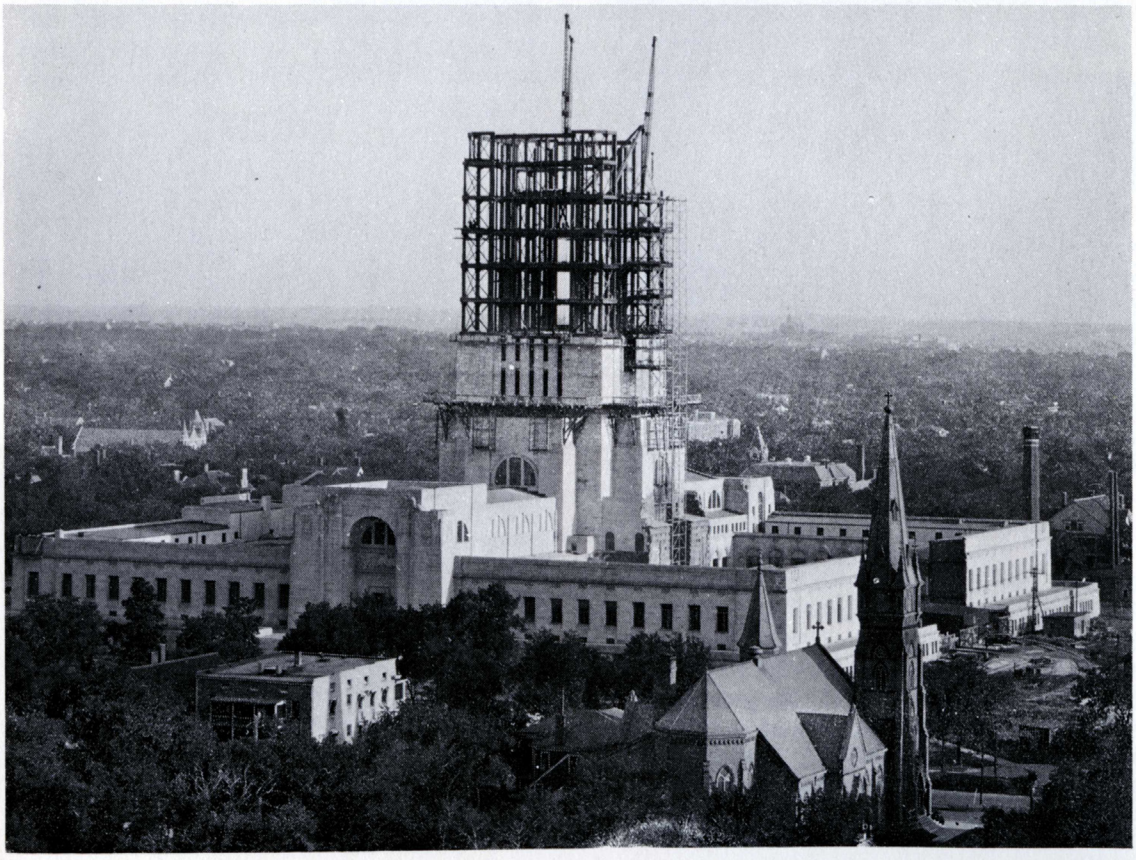


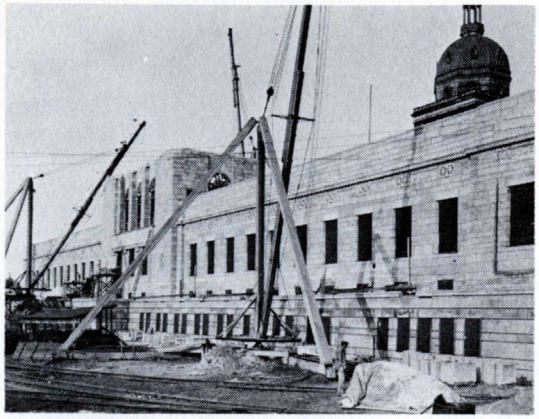
First Sections of new Capitol around the old Statehouse.



Excavating for tests on the site.

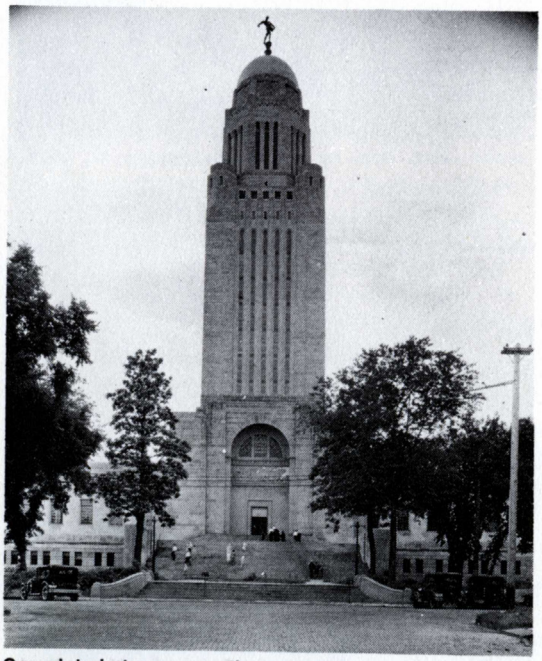
Work on the tower—view from the north. September 27, 1928.





South facade with old Capitol

The existing building would be used until space in the new building was provided, and the new building was built in sections, beginning around the old Capitol. Preparations for construction of the new Capitol began with soil testing in 1920. Building materials were delivered by truck and by railroad. A spur line was constructed around the site. The rails are visible in the photos.

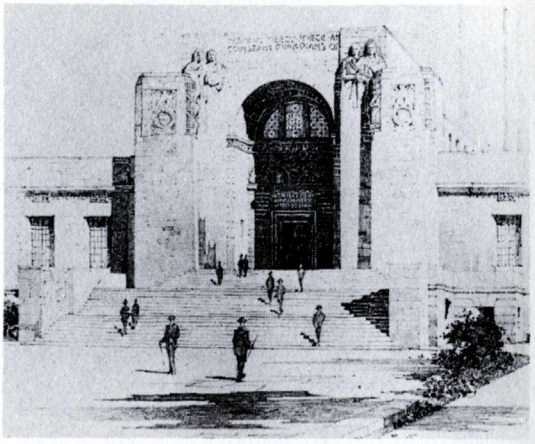


Completed tower—north entrance. June 14, 1931.

Razing of the old Capitol was completed in July, 1925, and immediately work was begun on the tower section. The tower was completed in 1930, and the final section of the building, the west Legislative Chamber was completed in 1932, ten years after formal ground breaking and at a cost of approximately $9,800,449.07. The building could not be built today for ten times that amount.

A UNIFIED DESIGN

"Sculpture here is not sculpture, but a branch grafted onto the architectural trunk."—Lee Lawrie, sculptor, Nebraska State Capitol Building.



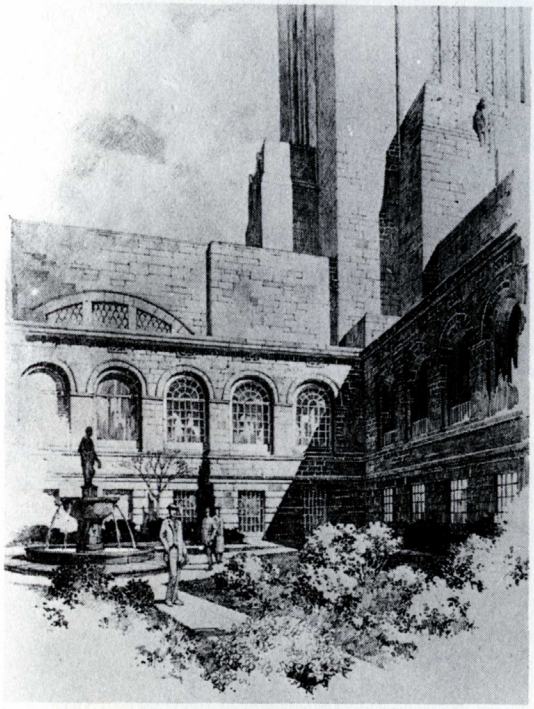
North Entrance; architect's sketch looking south to the main entrance.

In addition to selecting the best design, the Capitol Commission also sought to identify the architect best qualified to solve the total problem of a new Statehouse and state symbol. By omitting strict guidelines, the competition freed the competitors from restraints which may have inhibited the use of their best creative talents and in so doing influenced the direction other major competitions throughout the nation would take in the future.



The Promenade; architect's sketch looking south from the elevated terrace which extends completely around the building.

With the selection of Goodhue as architect, this sentiment by the Commission was continued throughout the planning process. Not only was he responsible for the building design, he also designated who he felt was most competent to complete the sculpture and interior murals and mosaics. With approval of each choice by the Commission, Goodhue and the associated artists were then free to proceed in a unified direction of design both in style and subject matter. The result of this approach has produced a positive relationship between the various parts of the building—the structure, the spaces, the decoration, materials, color, etc.—to form an integrated whole—a unified design.



Interior Courtyard; architect's sketch of one of four courtyards symmetrically placed around the tower.

Jutting up from the flatness of the plains and visible for up to 30 miles, the Nebraska State Capitol has been recognized since its inception as one of the world's architectural masterpieces.

The structure is approximately 400 feet square with four interior courtyards symmetrically placed around the tower. The tower itself is 79 feet square and rises 400 feet from its base to the crown of its dome. Resting on the dome is the most monumental sculpture of the building, the "Sower". It is made of one inch thick bronze, stands 19 feet tall (32 feet if the pedestal is included), and weighs 15,000 lbs. This as well as all other architectural sculpture on the building was designed by Lee Lawrie, a noted New York sculptor.

The subject matter for these sculptures can be divided into two general categories. The first comprises the evolution of law from ancient civilizations through the creation of constitutional law in the Western World. The sculptured pylons found along the top of the second floor are stylized to correspond with its historic sources. Themes involving ancient history, for example, are treated to suggest the way sculptors in the ancient world might have approached the problem. This can be seen with the work above the south entrance. The carvings of Akhnaton, Solon, Solomon and Julius Caesar are all of a more formalized, bulkier style than as the more naturalistic, rounded forms found in the reliefs located directly below which depict the signing of the Declaration of Independence and the drafting of the Constitution.

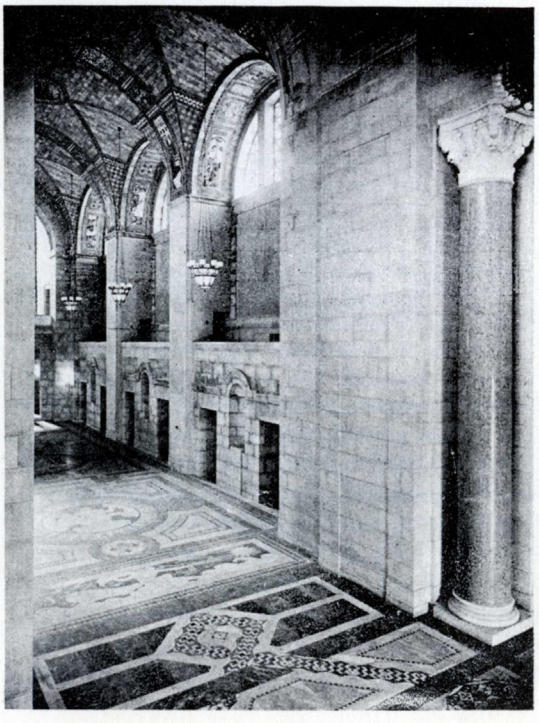


"Spirit of the Pioneers" contains symboism characteristic of the entire building.

The second category of subject matter concerns pioneer life in Nebraska. One of the most representative pieces of sculpture is the 9 by 25 foot frieze entitled "Spirit of the Pioneers" located over the north entrance. Here Lawrie symbolizes the pioneering spirit in search of the American Dream. Oxen pull a covered wagon beside which a family walks, each person carrying something of value to their future. William Cody on horseback and an eagle in flight compliment their westward journey.



South Entrance Sculpture; the Pylons of Akhnaton, Solon, Solomon and Julius Caesar



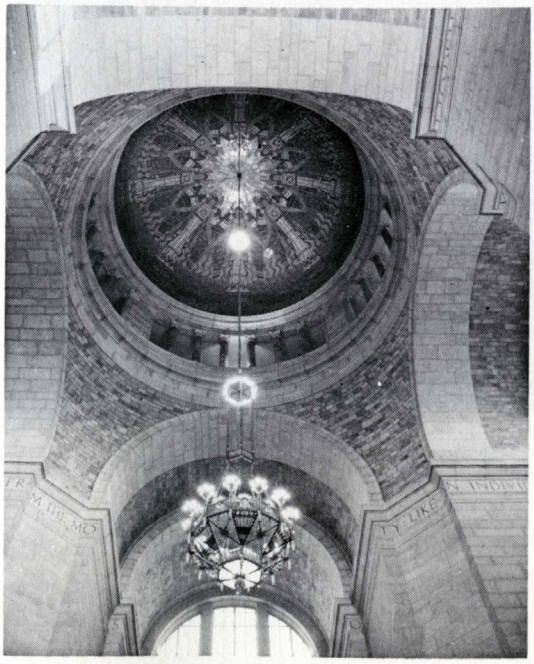
The Foyer; architect's sketch of the Great Hall leading from the vestibule directly to the central rotunda beneath the tower.



The interior of the Capitol is a dramatic contrast to the nearly mono-chrome exterior. Gold, yellow, red, blue, green and a myraid of colors brighten the floors, walls and ceilings. The responsibility of the architect Goodhue did not end with the exterior sculpture but includes selection of the mural panter and the mosaicist. He also determined the sequence of subject matter for the interior decoration according to how a visitor would probably walk through the space entering from the north door. The sequence of spaces and decorative symbolism is as follows:

ROOM	ICONOGRAPHY
Vestibule	Gifts of nature.
Foyer	Past, present and future life of man on the prairies of Nebraska.
Rotunda	Virtues which sustain society.
House chamber	Life of Indians, first dwellers of the plains.
Senate	Coming of white man in periods of settlement.
Library	Gifts of the spirit of man from all continents in all times.

In addition the Governor's Suite is decorated by minor sculpture by Lawrie and murals combining elements of symbolism found throughout the building.

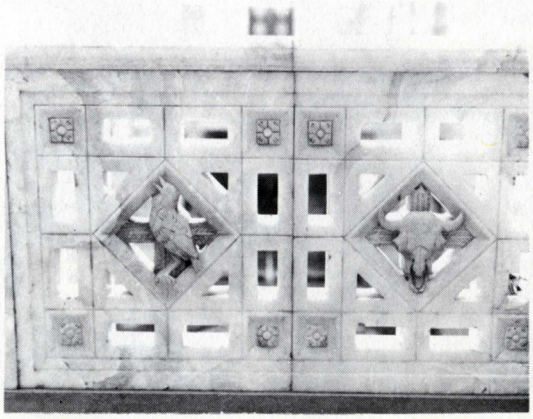


Looking up from the Rotunda floor to the dome and bronze chandelier.



"Genius of Water"—one of 5 major mosaic panels in the Rotunda floor.

The decoration consists of oil murals painted on linen, marble mosaics, tiles, sculpture, inscriptions, and bronze and onyx grills. The progression of symbolism may be followed in two ways: from area to area as outlined above, or from floor to ceiling. Viewed vertically the symbolism progresses from personification of elements such as water or the spirit of the soil to aspects of man's existence such as religion and virtue. The vertical progression parallels the development of the exterior sculptural program. In addition, the color scheme for the interior is related to the progression of the symbolism.



Pierced onyx carvings of meadowlark and bison crania on balcony railing over Rotunda.

The colorful decoration of the interior spaces transform a massive structure into a warm and lively space. This, combined with the exterior sculptural development, all under the direction of the creator of the spaces and exterior form, create a unified design.

CREDITS

"It is difficult for Nebraska to realize what it has done, but the people of your nation know, and they look to you for careful preservation of what has become a jewel among Historical Monuments."—Final report of Nebraska Capitol Commission to the Nebraska State Legislature, January 1, 1935.

For information about the photos and images in this brochure contact the Office of the Capitol Commission, 402-471-6691.



J. James Exon
Governor