

THE CAPITOL SOWER

THE NEWSLETTER OF THE CAPITOL COMMISSION | VOLUME ELEVEN | NUMBER TWO | JUNE 2019

The Nebraska Capitol Commission is Created

The passage of the Mears Tracewell Act on February 20, 1919 established a process to provide for the planning and construction of a capitol building and created a commission to oversee the project. The Nebraska Capitol Commission, as it came to be known, statutorily consisted of the Governor, the Secretary of the Board of Irrigation, Highways and Drainage, and three other residents of the State of Nebraska to be appointed by the Governor. Further, the Commission was to receive no salary, but was to be paid for actual expenses while away from home engaged in the duties of the Commission. Governor Samuel McKelvie chose Walter W. Head of Omaha, William H. Thompson of Grand Island and William E. Hardy of Lincoln to join himself and State Engineer George Johnson on the Commission.

The first meeting of the Nebraska Capitol Commission was held on May 9, 1919 in the Governor's Office of the second capitol. At that meeting the Commission

elected Governor McKelvie Chairman of the Commission, and George Johnson, State Engineer, temporary secretary. Throughout the initial 1919-1934 lifespan of the Commission, the citizen membership remained the same. With each election the new Governor assumed the role of Chairman; following McKelvie were Charles W. Bryan, Adam McMullen, Arthur J. Weaver and Bryan for a second term. When George Johnson left his role as State Engineer, his position on the Commission was taken over by the new State Engineer, Roy L. Cochran.

At the Nebraska Capitol Commission's second meeting, June 13, 1919, they discussed securing an Architectural Advisor and holding a competition for the plans. At the June 24, 1919 meeting Mr. Hardy was elected Vice-Chairman and Thomas Rogers Kimball of Omaha was chosen Architectural Advisor. The process to build a new capitol had begun. 

Nebraska Capitol Commission Membership

Pete Ricketts
Governor, Chairman

Jim Scheer
Speaker of the Legislature
Vice-Chairman

Michael Heavican
Chief Justice Supreme Court
Vice-Chairman

Katherine Ankersen
Dean
College of Architecture, UNL

Trevor Jones
Executive Director & CEO
Nebraska State Historical Society

Doug Carey
Congressional District 1

Thomas Sanderson
Congressional District 2

Vacant
Congressional District 3

Robert C. Ripley
Capitol Administrator
Secretary



The Nebraska Capitol Commission



History Nebraska photo

Nebraska Capitol Commission members and speakers at the laying of the cornerstone on November 11, 1922. Left to right, Walter W. Head, George E. Johnson, W. E. Hardy, William H. Thompson, Emcee H. H. Wilson, Governor Samuel R. McKelvie, and National Commander of the American Legion Alvin M. Owsley.

The three men Governor Samuel McKelvie appointed to the Nebraska Capitol Commission remained on the Commission throughout the construction of the Capitol. These Nebraska citizen members provided a continuity of knowledge and service through four governors and two state engineers. Their contribution to the successful completion of the Nebraska State Capitol cannot be forgotten.

Walter W. Head was born in Illinois in 1877 and taught school in Missouri before moving to Omaha, Nebraska. Starting as a bank cashier, he worked his way up to President of the Omaha National Bank in 1920. He continued his business career in Chicago and St. Louis and died in Connecticut in 1954.

William H. Thompson was born in Ohio in 1853 and graduated from the University of Iowa Law School in 1877. He moved to Grand Island in 1881 to practice law and was also involved in banking. He was an Associate Justice of the Nebraska Supreme Court from 1924 - 1931. Governor Bryan appointed him to complete the congressional term of Robert B. Howell in 1933. He died in 1937.

William E. Hardy was born in New York state in 1863; when he was seven his parents moved to Lincoln. He graduated from Lincoln High and attended Rochester Business Institute in NY and the University of Nebraska before taking over the family furniture business. He was active in business and philanthropy. He had an extensive knowledge of art and architecture from his travels in the United States and Europe. He served as President of the Nebraska State Historical Society and was Treasurer of the Nebraska Art Association. Hardy was a champion of Goodhue's vision to open 15th Street and create a link between the University and the Capitol. He died in 1934.

These three Nebraskans oversaw the creation of a Capitol which instills pride in all Nebraskans. The skills and abilities they brought to the Capitol Commission provides a lasting legacy of which all Nebraskans can be grateful. Future generations of Nebraskans will benefit from their dedication and hard work.



The Commission Takes Action

After hiring Thomas R. Kimball as Architectural Advisor in June of 1919 and discussing a competition process, the Nebraska Capitol Commission met again in July to identify a two-phase competition; first Nebraska architects would submit design ideas, and then a second phase would include nationally prominent architects and the top three Nebraskans. The Commission gave Kimball until September to create a Program to guide the competition. On September 9, 1919, Kimball's "Preliminary Statement of Proposed Competition for a Capitol Building for the State of Nebraska" was approved and the statewide competition announced.

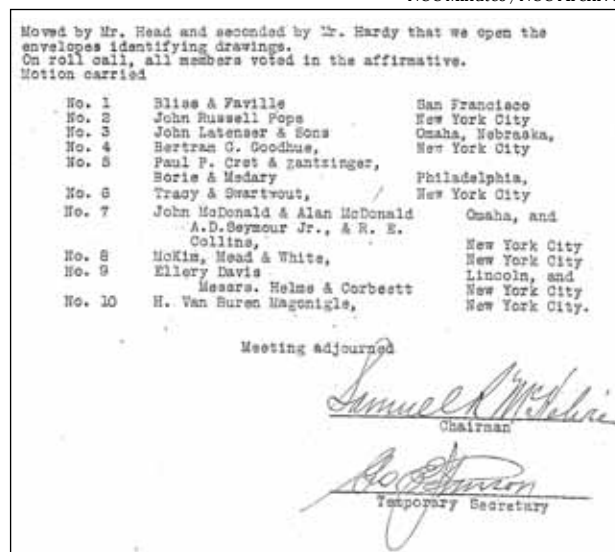
From November 3 - 7, 1919 the Nebraska Capitol Commission traveled from Lincoln to St. Paul, Minnesota, St. Paul to Madison, Wisconsin, then Madison to Jefferson City, Missouri and back to Lincoln. Minnesota's Capitol was completed in 1905 and the other two buildings had been completed in 1917. The inspection trip provided the Commission with information on the experiences of each state as they built their Capitol. At each location they were greeted by state dignitaries, received special guided tours of the facilities and discussed the construction and furnishing of each new building. The Commissioners took the information learned back to Lincoln and continued their work.


Working quickly, on December 1st and 2nd the Commissioners and the jury selected Ellery Davis of Lincoln, John Latenser & Sons of Omaha and John and Alan McDonald of Omaha as the Nebraska architects to compete in the final stage of competition. Then on December 3, 1919 the list of national architects to receive formal invitations was considered and adopted. In response to the invitations, eight of the ten architectural firms sent representatives to the January 10, 1920 Capitol Commission meeting to discuss the next steps in the process. On January 16 the Capitol Commission approved Kimball's final competition program and instructed it be distributed to interested parties. The Commission also discussed contracting with the architects in the competition. On February 3 the Commission instructed

Kimball to prepare the final draft of the competition program. Throughout the spring of 1920 Kimball corresponded with the architectural competitors, answering questions, sending program documents and maps of the site.

At the June 2, 1920 Commission meeting architectural advisor Kimball was directed to send a telegram to all competitors advising their architectural documents were to be sent by June 12th. Allowing two weeks for delivery, the Commission met again on June 24th with the selected Jury to see the drawings properly opened, numbered and hung for inspection in the Governor's Mansion. The Secretary of State held the envelopes containing the architect's identity and associated drawing number. The Jury, Kimball and three commission members spent June 25th reviewing the drawings and associated documents. After dinner on June 26th the Jury went into executive session and at 9:00 p.m. recommended architect No. 4 be selected.

NCC Minutes /NCC Archive



Within a year, the Nebraska Capitol Commission had organized, held a nationwide competition and identified Bertram Grosvenor Goodhue as the architect to design the new Capitol. Their work was just beginning. 

HISTORY OF THE NEBRASKA CAPITOL COMMISSION

by Jamison Wyatt
Capitol Scholar



On January 9, 1919, Governor Samuel McKelvie delivered his inaugural address before a joint session of the Nebraska Legislature from the rostrum of Representative Hall. Along the south wall of the hall, a dozen telephone poles with cross bracing attempted to stabilize the chamber. The roof trusses were inches from slipping off the supporting walls as the weak foundation caused the chamber to sink. McKelvie admonished:

The building of a new capitol is a matter that cannot be much longer deferred. Not only is the present capitol a discredit to the state, but it is inadequate to house the State Government and is actually unsafe for occupancy. . . . I believe it is time to approach this question in a courageous and businesslike manner, provide the ways and means for beginning the construction of a new capitol at the earliest convenient moment.

Previous governors had issued similar calls to no avail. McKelvie knew, however, that Nebraska, the United States, and the world were in a new era much different than that of his predecessors. With the signing of the final war armistice but two months before, civilization could now stabilize, rebuild, and remember. McKelvie concluded his plea for a new capitol:

If this project were undertaken now, the capitol could be dedicated to the memory of the gallant soldiers and sailors who enlisted their service during this war.

Three days after the inaugural ceremony, the Nebraska legislature introduced not one but two capitol bills. Representative George E. Tracewell of Valentine introduced House Roll 2, and Representative Grant S. Mears of Wayne introduced House Roll 3. (Only the moral urgency to ratify the Eighteenth Amendment to the U.S. Constitution prevented a capitol bill from being designated “House Roll 1.”) Both bills called for the creation of a five-member Capitol Commission to oversee construction of a new capitol, and both bills established a construction levy of one mill on each dollar’s valuation of property. Governor McKelvie favored the Mears bill—House Roll 3—the bill he personally drafted with assistance from a Lincoln attorney. Tracewell, unaware of the governor’s plan prior to introduction, agreed to abandon his measure and support the Mears bill. In that way, the Nebraska State Journal joked, Tracewell and Mears could “encourage the building of one capitol instead of two.”

On January 30, representatives passed House Roll 3 after the third and final reading (93 to 2), and the Senate, though it threatened to amend, subsequently passed House Roll 3 with no changes on February 17 (27 to 2). Three days later McKelvie not only signed the bill with its emergency clause but appointed the new Capitol Commission. William E. Hardy, president of Hardy Furniture Company, and Walter W. Head, vice president of the Omaha National Bank, were Republicans from Lincoln and Omaha respectively. William H. Thompson, a prominent lawyer, was a Democrat from Grand Island. The three citizen members joined the ex officio members, Governor McKelvie and State Engineer George E. Johnson, to become the Nebraska Capitol Commission.

The 1919 commission was the first named “Capitol Commission.” From 1867 to 1869, Governor David Butler, Secretary of State Thomas P. Kennard, and Auditor John Gillespie served on a “Commission” that was responsible for locating and platting a seat of government to be named Lincoln, but contemporary legislative records and newspaper accounts only referred to the trio as the “Commissioners.” In 1886, newspaperman Charles H. Gere labeled Butler, Kennard, and Gillespie as the “Capital Commission.” Thus they are remembered.


The Nebraska Capitol Commission organized on May 9, 1919, and shortly thereafter, hired Omaha architect Thomas Rogers Kimball to serve as Professional Advisor. Kimball, president of the American Institute of Architects, believed a competition program would be the best means of selecting a capitol architect—an architect who would be unfettered by any predetermined plan, scope, or style. He organized the competition, received entries, and by late evening, June 26, 1920, Bertram Grosvenor Goodhue of New York was named architect for Nebraska’s new statehouse.

After the commission allowed a special property tax for construction to accrue, McKelvie ceremoniously broke ground on Goodhue’s skyscraper capitol on April 15, 1922. Ten years later, the superstructure was completed, yet the commission continued to oversee decorative finishes, furnishing, and landscaping through 1934. The commission issued its final report to the legislature in January 1935 and marginally operated until 1937. That year, the legislature dissolved the commission, and Governor Roy Cochran—who had served on the Capitol Commission from 1923 as state engineer—became the official custodian of the capitol.

In 1949, the legislature created the State Building Commission, effectively resurrecting the Capitol Commission after a twelve-year dissolution. The new commission charged the governor, state engineer, and three appointed citizens “to supervise the repairs and improvements of the capitol building costing in excess of ten thousand dollars,” and for the next twenty-five years, the commission carried out its duties with ever-expanding jurisdiction over the Governor’s Mansion and the planning of a new state office building.

In 1965, the legislature created the Department of Administrative Services to serve as a central agency to perform accounting, budgeting, and purchasing for the executive branch. Additionally, the legislature made the department the new custodian of the capitol and required the director to appoint a Superintendent of Building and Grounds to aid in the performance of the custodianship. In 1974, the legislature gave the department greater authority over the capitol by establishing the State Building Division and subsequently restructured the State Building Commission as an advisory board to the new division. With peripheral status, the newly named State Building Advisory Commission effectively ceased to function by the early eighties.

In 1993, the legislature resuscitated the commission by eliminating its advisory role and by giving it greater authority in overseeing the ongoing preservation of the Nebraska State Capitol. The legislature restored the commission’s original name and expanded the size of the Capitol Commission with three new ex officio members: the Chief Justice of the Supreme Court, the Speaker of the Legislature, and the dean of the College of Architecture at the University of Nebraska-Lincoln.

The last major change to the commission occurred in 2004 with the adoption of the Nebraska State Capitol Preservation and Restoration Act. The act made the commission the official custodian of the capitol, established an independent executive office to serve the commission, and provided the statutory framework to achieve “the highest quality preservation, restoration, and enhancement of and long-term planning for the State Capitol and capitol grounds for the perpetual use by state government and the enjoyment of all persons.” Today, the nine-member Nebraska Capitol Commission and the twenty-nine-member Office of the Nebraska Capitol Commission serve to uphold their collective mission to ensure that the Nebraska State Capitol endures for many more centuries to come. 



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Nebraska Capitol Commission

Nebraska State Capitol
Seventh Floor
1445 K Street
P.O. Box 94696
Lincoln, Nebraska
68509-4696
www.capitol.org
402.471.6691



Capitol Architect
Bertram Grosvenor Goodhue, 1869-1924

Project Brings National Attention

“The State of Nebraska is to build a new capitol. In the selection of an architect, a competition is to be held. As a new capitol is a comparatively rare undertaking, the event is one of considerable interest.”

-Journal of the American Institute of Architects June 1919

“The new State Capitol of Nebraska will be of interest to the architectural profession, on account of the unusual design that won the competition and because of the novel character of the competition itself. In fact, the bold originality of the design may well have been due to the way in which the competition was conducted.”

-Architectural Record July 1920

“To the group of distinguished capitol buildings that adorn the various States there is to be an addition that will have a great deal of interest and architectural novelty.State pride and public spirit will surely be fostered by this great enterprise.”

-Stone Magazine August 1920

“For the first time an important competition has been held unburdened with restrictions as to cubage, itemized costs or other details which belong properly to the later development of a large problem and merely choke free action during its first conception.As a result this competition has obtained an unusual solution of the problem, which is as revolutionary, when compared with the designs for other state capitols, as were the terms of the competition itself.”

-Architectural Record September 1920

Guided Tours are offered Monday-Friday hourly from 9:00 a.m. to 5:00 p.m., except at noon. Saturday and Holidays from 10:00 a.m. to 5:00 p.m., except at noon and Sunday from 1:00 to 4:00 p.m. Please call 402.471.0448 or visit www.capitol.nebraska.gov

The Capitol Sower, published by the Office of the Capitol Commission, is available online at www.capitol.org. Contact the Tourism Supervisor at [<roxanne.smith@nebraska.gov>](mailto:roxanne.smith@nebraska.gov) for more information.

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