

David W Fletcher, Spring 1999

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THE TENNESSEE STATE CAPITOL

The Tennessee State Capitol sits on the crest of downtown Nashville defined by Charlotte Avenue on the south, the James Robertson Parkway loop on the north, Seventh Avenue North to the west, and Fifth Avenue North to the east. As with most of downtown Nashville, parking around the Capitol is limited.¹ Access for the handicapped is available from the ground level and then by elevator to the first and second floors of the Capitol.

Approaching the Capitol from the west gives the visitor the opportunity to peruse two interesting Tennessee Historical Markers. First, the “Black Churches of Capitol Hill” marks the vicinity of black A.M.E., Baptist, Christian, and Presbyterian churches dating from the latter half of the nineteenth century. Second, “Nashville Sit-Ins” locates Civil Rights activity at the former First Baptist Church on the corner of Charlotte and Eighth Avenues.

From the immediate west, the view of the Capitol is blocked by the Tennessee State Library and Archives and the Tennessee Supreme Court. But the visitor enjoys a grand view of the Capitol from the corner of Charlotte and Seventh Avenues.² Here, fortress-like retaining walls and a sturdy iron gate frame the Capitol and a slightly offset statue of Sam Davis.³ The

¹Garage parking is expensive. It is best to park at the Tennessee Bicentennial Capitol Mall State Park and walk to the Capitol. Otherwise, visit on Saturday or Sunday and park west below the James Robertson Parkway for an easy walk up the hill to the Capitol.

²This view is enhanced by visiting on a beautiful spring day with sunny, bright blue sky.

³The story of Sam Davis, that of noble character in life and death, befits the place where legislators convene to direct the affairs of fellow Tennesseans.

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basic temple form of the Capitol transforms “the highest hill in the town’s center into Nashville’s acropolis. Set on a high base in the manner of Roman religious buildings, the Capitol is determinedly Greek in its exterior.”⁴ The distinct cupola,⁵ the slender Ionic columns,⁶ and the plain but sharp lines result in “a style of sophisticated elaboration applied to forms of massive simplicity.”⁷ Different looks at the Capitol, however, present striking variations of its aesthetic majesty along with shrines to Tennessee’s notables.

⁴Christine Kreyling, Wesley Paine, Charles W. Warterfield, Jr., and Susan Ford Wiltshire, *Classical Nashville: Athens of the South* (Nashville, TN: Vanderbilt University Press, 1996), 41-42. “Strickland considered the Tennessee State Capitol his ultimate statement in Greek Revival. He used all three Greek orders: a Doric basement, Ionic porticoes, and a Corinthian cupola.” Carroll Van West, *Tennessee’s Historic Landscapes: A Traveler’s Guide* (Knoxville, TN: University of Tennessee Press, 1995), 96.

⁵More properly “an adaptation of the Choragic Monument of Lysicrates, an ancient artifact in the Corinthian order that [Strickland] had already used with success on the Merchants’ Exchange [in Philadelphia].” Kreyling, et al., *Classical Nashville*, 43, 166.

⁶Pieces of the original columns lie in a memorial garden on the north flank of Capitol Hill. Because of deterioration, they were replaced in the 1950s. Harkening to the ancient tradition of ruins of remembrance, “the Strickland fragments bind the past to the present on Nashville’s acropolis. They lie in their own garden as part of the restoration and renovation of Capitol Hill that includes, immediately adjacent, a belvedere overlooking Tennessee’s monument to its two-hundredth year: the Bicentennial Mall. Taken in conjunction, the old columns and the new mall articulate in three dimensions the past, present, and future of the classical style in Nashville. The time-blurred columns of Strickland silently prophesy the inevitable passing of all that is man-made: Delphi or Pompeii, Athens or Nashville. That Tennessee at two hundred has fashioned a memorial with this oracular message establishes a community with the classical past that reaches beyond the New World of the nineteenth century to the ancient ruins of the Mediterranean.” *Ibid.*, 145ff.

⁷*Ibid.*

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Motlow Tunnel, a bold structure with the State Seal emblazoned on each of its metal doors, protrudes south from the Capitol. An oversized statue of Edward Carmack juts out of the tunnel's roof.⁸ More importantly, here the visitor learns that the Capitol was designated as a Registered National Historic Landmark in 1972. The historical marker instructs:

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Designed by William Strickland, noted Philadelphia architect who also designed the tower of Independence Hall. Construction was commenced in 1845 and completed in 1859. Strickland died in 1854 and is entombed in the north portico. His son, Francis, supervised construction from 1854 to 1857. Slaves and convicts quarried and transported limestone for the Capitol, which was used as a fortress during the Civil War. President and Mrs. James K. Polk are buried on the east lawn.

The city walk sign adds the following:

The Tennessee State Capitol stands on the highest hill in the central city. The Greek Revival style building was the last and perhaps finest work of architect William Strickland, who came to Nashville from Philadelphia where he had designed the Merchants Exchange and the Second Bank of the U.S., among others.

For the best overlook of the south end of the Capitol, however, the visitor should go further south to the War Memorial Plaza.

From the southeast gate, the visitor sees the length of the Capitol as a backdrop to nice evergreen landscaping⁹ and, impressively, a colossal statue of Alvin C. York in full battle dress

⁸Why Carmack? Tennesseans, like most humans, glamorize the sensational and the bizarre, even in their monuments. For a brief summary of the shooting of this U.S. Senator from Tennessee and later editor of the *Nashville Tennessean*, see Robert E. Corlew, *Tennessee: A Short History* (2nd ed.; Knoxville: University of Tennessee Press, 1990), 427.

⁹Tall evergreens on the left, a recent dedication to Jewish victims of the Nazi Holocaust, magnificently frame the Capitol.

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with rifle in hands, finger on trigger, and steely eyes focused dead ahead. The walkway to the Capitol passes a rather meager¹⁰ statue to Andrew Johnson, the 17th President of the U.S. (1865-1869), and also a replica of Philadelphia's Liberty Bell.¹¹

From the "front" or east side of the Capitol, about sixty long marble steps lead up to an open courtyard with fountains flanked by bright yellow tulips in springtime bloom. Old Hickory himself, Andrew Jackson who was the 7th President of the U.S. (1829-1837), beckons a salute to visitors from his classic pose on horseback with sword at side and triangle hat in hand. The statue of Jackson, interestingly, faces the Capitol.

From the northeast side, there is a splendid view of the north face of the Capitol. This view does not have quite the elegance as the others,¹² but there are not bad views of the Capitol. Newly planted trees add to the pleasantness of the climb to the Capitol from here. This walkway passes the site of the first Catholic Church in Tennessee, the Holy Rosary Cathedral, which was built by Irish Catholic workers in 1828. Holy Rosary became St. John's Hospital and Orphanage when St. Mary's Cathedral was erected in 1847. In 1857, the site was sold to the state and became part of the Capitol grounds. Nearer the Capitol are the tombs of James Knox Polk, the 11th President of the U.S. (1845-1849), and his beloved wife, Sarah Childress.

¹⁰In comparison to the statues of Carmack and York.

¹¹The black "crack" painted on this bell is quite amusing. It doesn't do justice to the original.

¹²The north end is not so impressive up close due to the "clutter" of the modern skyline.

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On weekends the front or east entrance to the Capitol is locked, so the visitor must enter from the north or south. Members of the Capitol staff offer guided tours of the interior on weekdays beginning at 9, 10, and 11 A.M. and also at 1, 2, and 3 P.M. Reservations can be made by calling in advance. But weekend explorers can obtain an excellent “Self-Guided Walking Tour” brochure at the welcome counter and take a self tour. Inside the Capitol, elevators give access to all levels. A water fountain is located on the first floor. Restrooms are found on both ground level and the second floor.

Inside, the floor sparkles. The stone interior is impressive.

The interiors are marked by the same creative tension between stern, simple structure and elaborate detailing that Strickland had already established on the exterior. Walls of plain Tennessee limestone, laid vertically to utilize its whorls and graining as the only decoration, form a severe contrast to painted ceilings and highly worked chandeliers and oak doors.¹³

The self-guided tour begins appropriately with portraits of the architect William Strickland, his financier Samuel Morgan, and the three Tennessee Presidents. The ceiling frescoes are nice and simple. The tombs of Morgan and Strickland (died April 7, 1854 at age 64) in the walls of the Capitol reflect European tradition (e.g., crypts in cathedral walls). The chip in the marble staircase handrail befits “western” or Reconstruction (to be correct contextually) law and order.¹⁴ The condition of the marble in both staircase and handrails is simply amazing! Is this the

¹³Kreyling, et al., *Classical Nashville*, 44.

¹⁴“This is a scar from a bullet fired from the stairs above during a particularly bitter fight in the legislature over the ratification of the 14th amendment in 1866.” See “The Tennessee State Capitol: A Self-Guided Walking Tour” (Nashville, TN: Tennessee State Museum, 1998), sec. 17.

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original marble? While some cracks are noticeable here and there, most columns of the handrails are intact and solid. Evidently, they have been maintained meticulously.

One benefit to a weekend visit, especially while the legislature is in session, is access to the House and Senate chambers on the second floor. The House chambers are not the most attractive but nonetheless impressive. You would think the stone would give a cold feel or atmosphere to the room, but not so. Perhaps the bright red carpet with the solid cherry or mahogany desks compensates the tall stone columns and long yellow drapes. The whole space is dramatized by a very high ceiling and four beautiful chandeliers each with 24 lamps. Overall the chamber gives the impression of an orderly yet working environment. I sat for a while in hope that by osmosis some legislative marvel or miracle might enter my brain, but it did not happen. One critique, however, is that the backlit boxes on each side of the room at gallery level look too much like modern electronic scoreboards. I suppose this is a quick and easy way to tally votes.

Before I could ascend the stairs to the House gallery,¹⁵ I sweet-talked my way past the elderly lady who was staff security during a youth political event. In the gallery, I thought, “Now this is more like it—rustic, worn, old stuff!” And looking down through the high pillars gives a certain impression. I felt as if transported back through time, or as if by accident, some surreal episode from the classical Greek or Roman past might happen before my very eyes—Speaker Jimmy Naifeh dressed in a Roman toga addressing the Tennessee House of Representatives!

¹⁵The iron rails and lampposts may be original, but they certainly are not in their original condition with such drab, grey paint.

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Before entering the Senate chambers, the visitor encounters a magnificent ceiling light. Like a spreading protuberance from the high ceiling, the lamp appears to be an optical illusion. It looks like it might fall at any moment. I stood under it to test fate, but nothing happened. The interior of the Senate chambers seems more austere, but crowded, less open, less inviting, and much less orderly than the House—just the opposite of what one might expect. Perhaps the tight circular layout of desks contrasts sharply with the straight row arrangement of desks in the House. Too, the large, noisy copying machine at the south end of the chambers seems out of place. The disturbance from this modern apparatus made any osmosis of legislative prowess strictly improbable. On a positive note, though, I thought the Senate gallery was nicer than the House gallery.

All in all, I enjoyed the self-guided tour of the Tennessee State Capitol. On the inside, no damage from last spring's tornados seems noticeable. On the outside, the beautiful landscaping of the grounds, the fine historic monuments, and the classical Greek architecture make the Tennessee State Capitol well worth the visit.

TENNESSEE BICENTENNIAL CAPITOL MALL STATE PARK

Tennessee Bicentennial Mall opened in 1996 and proudly ushered in the state's third century during the bicentennial Statehood Day celebrations on June 1, 1996. This link of continuity between past, present, and future was by no means accidental to the planning and construction of the Mall. But the need to preserve local classical tradition furnished the greatest motivation for the Mall's development.

As early as the turn of the century, concern had surfaced among Nashvillians over the gradual loss of visual dominance by Strickland's Capitol. With the addition of skyscrapers to the skyline, beginning in the 1950s, that concern became acute. The large plain to the north became the sole means available to infuse some stamina into the visual presence of the city's most important historic structure.

As a massive public works project undertaken not for a strictly functional purpose but for the education and delight of the citizens, the Mall is a late revival of the City Beautiful Movement, which brought a classically inspired civic purpose to the planning of pre-World War I American cities. As a memorial to the unique heritage and character of the Volunteer State, the Mall recalls the Acropolis of Athens and the Forum of Rome, among many ancient sites that used civic financial resources for purposes of collective gathering, commemoration, and ceremony. A public space dedicated to education, aesthetic delight, and civic identity, the Bicentennial Mall distills the essence of classicism in many of the same ways that the Parthenon did in Centennial Park a hundred years earlier.¹⁶

In its emphasis on classical continuity, which it certainly achieves, the Mall does not lose its focus on the rich heritage of the Volunteer State. The park forms a long, narrow nineteen acre rectangular extension from the north grounds of the State Capitol. The park is open all hours and access is unlimited with applicable state park restrictions. Restrooms, snacks, and drinks are

¹⁶Kreyling, et al., *Classical Nashville*, 147, 149.

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located to the left under the railroad trestle. To the right is the Visitor Center. The Farmers Market is nearby, just to the west, for those who grow weary of history and want to eat or shop.

The visitor is greeted by a giant plaza map of Tennessee, very detailed, where you can literally walk across the state in a few moments. It is hard not to stop, look, and ponder. I thought about those places in Tennessee that have influenced my life. It seemed surreal, like walking back through time. The map is to a scale of one foot equals two and one-half miles. The plaza also has a large compass to show true directional bearing. I found the length of the eastern border of Tennessee impressive and a surprise. And the visual look northeast from Chattanooga to the tri-cities area is phenomenal. Nearby, raised displays that are shaped like the state highlight Tennessee's topography, musical roots, natural areas and state parks, historic trails, landscapes, early natives, and geologic foundations.

Roadway entrances beneath the railroad trestle with arched towers demonstrate the symmetry of two centuries of history from 1796 to 1996. The two large flagpoles encircled by eight smaller flagpoles also capture this bicentennial theme. In-between, a long granite wall with an arched top details information about Tennessee's 50,000 miles of streams and rivers and more than 500,000 acres of public lakes. Fountains in front of the wall splash water skyward. Each fountain bears the name of a Tennessee river. Some quotes from the wall were quite poignant, especially that from Marilou Awiakta, "Tellico Dam made a Lake of Tears"

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Nice walkways, gardens, and a central outdoor amphitheater with Capitol Hill as the backdrop make the Mall an attractive, pleasant setting. The amphitheater's focus on the Capitol borrows from a classical motif.

An open-air theater, composed of concrete risers and grass terraces, is situated in a partially excavated site to replicate the earthen compass of the Greek theater. It faces to the south so that the Capitol forms a backdrop for performances. The scene is powerfully reminiscent of ancient Athens, where the Theater of Dionysos was similarly situated on the slopes of the Acropolis beneath a colonnaded temple.¹⁷

The only distraction to this beautifully reconstructed setting is the modern skyline of Nashville.

The "County Circles" Walkway parallels Seventh Avenue North and details county name, location on a state map, date established, total square miles, county seat, and a brief history for each of Tennessee's ninety-five counties. To the east are historical markers for French Lick Creek, Sulphur Dell Minor League Baseball Park (which was in use as late as 1963), and Sulphur Spring Bottom, all a nice aside. A "Court of 3 Stars" that will feature a ninety-five bell Tennessee carillon is currently under construction at the north end of the Mall and will be "dedicated to the musical heritage and rich diversity of the citizens of the Volunteer State." Also on the north side, a marker displays the "Tennessee Bicentennial Capitol Mall Coda" with respectful thoughts.

A 1,400 foot granite wall extends the west length of the Mall. This "Pathway of History" marks important events, ideas, people, and quotes from Tennessee's two-hundred-year history.

¹⁷Ibid.

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Perhaps this is too much history for one visit, but the overall impression of the wall is fabulous.¹⁸

Various memorials are located just inside the wall. The “World War II Memorial” presents important wartime events on large vertical “wings” in formation around a big granite globe that depicts the world at that time.

A dedication circle to the Centennial Exposition, held in Nashville from May through October 1897, show exhibits from the Exposition and illustrates Governor Bob Taylor’s wonder over the progress of the state since the Civil War. Sobering is the symbolism of the broken wall from about 1850 through 1870. However, the resilient spirit of “Volunteerism” is aptly epitomized by the fact that the Army of Tennessee was the last major Confederate force to surrender the war effort on April 26, 1865. One critique of this marvel of a timeline is the need for something more consequential for the expulsion of the Cherokee in 1838. This was not simply white expulsion of 4,000 souls but also the banishment of a people, their ancestry, and their posterity.

Perhaps the most emotional part of the wall, for me personally, was Alex Haley’s quote.

Home is a place where a person feels deep within himself that this is a place where he can return to and be comforted and comfortable; a place where a person can feel psychically secure because he is surrounded by positive uplifting things. There is also a spiritualness about home because home addresses almost every need we have, even the ones we may not consciously be aware of.¹⁹

¹⁸It is much better, I think, than the Vietnam Veteran Memorial in Washington, D.C., but each has its own significance.

¹⁹Alex Haley, 1986, “Pathway of History,” The Tennessee Bicentennial Capitol Mall State Park (Nashville, TN: Tennessee Department of Environment and Conservation, 1996).

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Not only did this quote strike the heart of one born and raised in Tennessee and trying to “find himself” after being away for over twenty years, but Haley’s thoughts also speak to the heritage every Tennessean enjoys in this place between Appalachia and the Mississippi that they call home. This heritage is enshrined beautifully in the Tennessee Bicentennial Capitol Mall State Park.

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