



General Assembly Building

Background

The General Assembly Building at the corner of Broad and Ninth Streets, facing Capitol Square, reflects the last century of architectural evolution of public architecture of downtown Richmond, considered by some to be the finest assemblage of 20th century architecture in downtown Richmond. Not only do the iconic elements of the exterior façades provide a distinguished and distinctive backdrop to Capitol Square and Broad Street, but the building's significance extends beyond its individual contribution to Richmond's history and architecture to the historic integrity of the streetscape of Thomas Jefferson's Capitol Square.

The Life of Virginia Building

Thomas Jefferson's early vision for Capitol Square during his term as Governor called for the erection of separate buildings for the legislative, judicial and executive branches of the government, a strict division previously unknown in America or Europe, and a vision that anticipated the separation of those branches that would later be embedded in the Constitution. Jefferson's drawings from that time include street maps and sketches for separate buildings for each branch of government.ⁱ Later, working with Charles-Louis Clérisseau, Jefferson would design the Capitol in the classic style of antiquity with a view to providing "travelers a morsel of taste in our infancy promising much for our maturer age."ⁱⁱ Jefferson's design, based on the Maison Carrée, a Roman temple in Nîmes, France, established a precedent in the United States for monumental public buildings.ⁱⁱⁱ

The classical elements of Jefferson's Capitol design are echoed in the façade of the General Assembly building. The General Assembly Building was built over several building campaigns and is comprised of three primary components. The initial building, known as the Life of Virginia Building, is considered one of the finest early 20th century Beaux-Arts-style buildings in Virginia. The main structure was built in several parts. The first building, facing Capitol Square, is five stories high and was completed in 1912.^{iv} (See Figures 3 and 5 below.)

Alfred Charles Bossom of Clinton and Russell, a well-known architectural firm in New York, designed the 1912 building.^v Alfred Charles Bossom was an English born architect and noted as a designer of tall office buildings. His work in Richmond includes the First National Bank Building at 823 E. Main Street, the Virginia Mutual Building at 815-821 E. Main Street, and the Prestwold Apartment Building on W. Franklin at Pine Street. After two decades working in New York City, Bossom returned to England, was elected to Parliament, and became a baronet and later a life peer in the House of Lords.^{vi}

The 1912 building features three-story-tall Corinthian pilasters with American eagles, cherubs, and winged horses. This is the only example of Pegasus in classical columns in all of Richmond.^{vii} (See Figures 6 and 7 below.) Bossom's likely source for the Pegasus capitals was Andrea Palladio's drawing of a Pegasus capital from the Temple of Mars Ultor in Rome.^{viii} Robert P. Winthrop states that the "architectural façade with its multiple pilasters and columns, all in Corinthian order, was unmatched in Richmond."^{ix} The original entrance to the building is on the southwest corner of the façade, facing Capitol Street. This entrance has "handsome bronze gates and an elaborately carved



stone frontispiece with a semicircular arched pediment supported by scroll brackets.”^x The original entrance was glazed to make a window, but the exterior appearance has remained unaltered.^{xi}

The Life Insurance Company of Virginia, original owner and occupant, moved its headquarters to this prominent location overlooking Capitol Square. The company was started shortly after the end of the Civil War by a group of Petersburg investors. This venture would become one of the largest and most successful insurance firms in United States history. The Virginia General Assembly passed an act of incorporation for the “Life Insurance Company of Virginia” in March 1871, with A. G. McIlwaine as president and D’Arcy Paul and D. B. Tennant as vice presidents. Under general agent F.W. Chamberlayne, the Richmond Department attracted a large number of new clients. Within the first decade, the company’s client base expanded beyond the South. Within another decade, the company moved its headquarters to Richmond, itself fast becoming the leading Southern financial and banking center. As its reputation grew and its advertising strategy broadened, both Southerners and Northerners were attracted in increasing numbers to products that proved reliable and reasonably economical to purchase. Customers included many professional people, but also included artisans and craftsmen, laborers and housekeepers. The first African American customer purchased a policy in mid-1872 and thereafter African Americans and women appeared with some regularity as policy holders.^{xii} As the century progressed, the company became known more familiarly as “Life of Virginia.”

The 1923 Addition

As evidence of the company’s rapid growth, the company built an addition in 1923 on the north side of the initial building, with a façade along Broad Street. (See Figure 2 below.) The eleven-story tower, also designed by Clinton and Russell, reflects a “restrained classical style.”^{xiii} The 1923 addition features a cornice with modillions and dentils, doric order pilasters with a decorated band of anthemion and a balustrade along the roof edge.^{xiv} The building was designed as a Beaux-Arts high rise, which was a popular design for official buildings during the early part of the 20th century. The Beaux-Arts style was derived from the L’École des Beaux Arts, a leading international school of architecture active from the 1870s to the 1930s. The 1923 addition was further connected to the Life of Virginia portion of the building in 1955 with a six-story structure.^{xv}

The Marcellus Wright and Partners Addition

In 1965, Life of Virginia commissioned a second addition designed by the local architectural firm, Marcellus Wright and Partners. (See Figures 2, 3, and 8 below.) The steel framed structure of this addition artfully and purposefully uses concrete paneled faces to mimic the architectural divisions and bays of the earlier structures. Soon after its completion, the Virginia Museum of Fine Arts included the Marcellus Wright and Partners addition in its publication celebrating the Commonwealth’s finest architecture. William B. O’Neal, author, notes the differing floor heights rarely seen in most modern high-rises add “vivacity of proportion that is expressed with firmly modeled corners, rhythmic window divisions, and strong structural elements.”^{xvi} Robert Winthrop called the tower “the most sensitively designed highrise in the city.”^{xvii}

The modernist movement was a departure from traditional building types and was largely popular during the 20th century in downtown buildings. Many modern buildings were built under the dictum that “form follows function” and are often characterized by geometric or sculptural forms, absence of



applied ornament, machine-made component, and new expressions of space, usually achieved through extensive use of glass.^{xviii} The Marcellus Wright and Partners addition is considered the city’s finest mid-century modern high rise. The addition won numerous architectural awards as a thoughtful and sensitive complement to the Beaux-Arts high rise building.

IBM, whose history in Virginia began in 1917 with the opening of its first office, leased space in the Marcellus Wright and Partners addition beginning in 1965 until 1975.^{xix} In November, 1975, the Commonwealth of Virginia purchased the entire building for use as offices for the Virginia legislature and, thus, the building is now referred to as the General Assembly Building or simply the “GAB.”

Together, the building and its additions reflect the last century of architectural evolution of the public architecture of downtown Richmond. Architecture critics and commentators have described the General Assembly Building as the finest assemblage of 20th century architecture in downtown Richmond.^{xx} Importantly, the building maintains the historic integrity of the streetscape of Jefferson’s Capitol Square with its orientation towards Capitol Square and its thoughtful reflection of the classical elements of Jefferson’s Capitol design.

Recommendations

Based on the significant architectural and cultural value of the General Assembly Building to the Capitol Square complex, Historic Richmond encourages the restoration, repurposing and reuse of the General Assembly Building and its façades rather than its complete demolition. The General Assembly Building - from its 1912 beginnings as the Life of Virginia Building overlooking Capitol Square; to the classically refined 1923 high rise addition accessible from Broad Street; to the concrete and steel-frame Modernist addition of 1965 - represents the architectural evolution of public architecture in downtown Richmond. It supports the surrounding architecture and historic context of both Broad Street and Capitol Square, is respectful to the Capitol, yet is distinguished and enduring in its own right. The building serves as a valuable lesson for how buildings collectively engage with important public spaces, streets, and the citizenry.

We note that state-owned buildings in the Capitol Square neighborhood offer numerous examples for the successful rehabilitation of old buildings to accommodate new uses. With landmark neighbors - such as Old City Hall, Jefferson’s Capitol, the Washington Building, the Oliver W. Hill Building, the Patrick Henry Building, the Library of Virginia, the 9th Street Office Building, Monumental Church, and VCU’s historic core –the General Assembly Building is integral to maintaining the rich cultural, architectural, and historic integrity of the streetscape and Capitol Square. Any design for new construction in and around Capitol Square deserves careful consideration and the opportunity for input from citizens and organizations committed to preserving Capitol Square’s distinctive historic character.

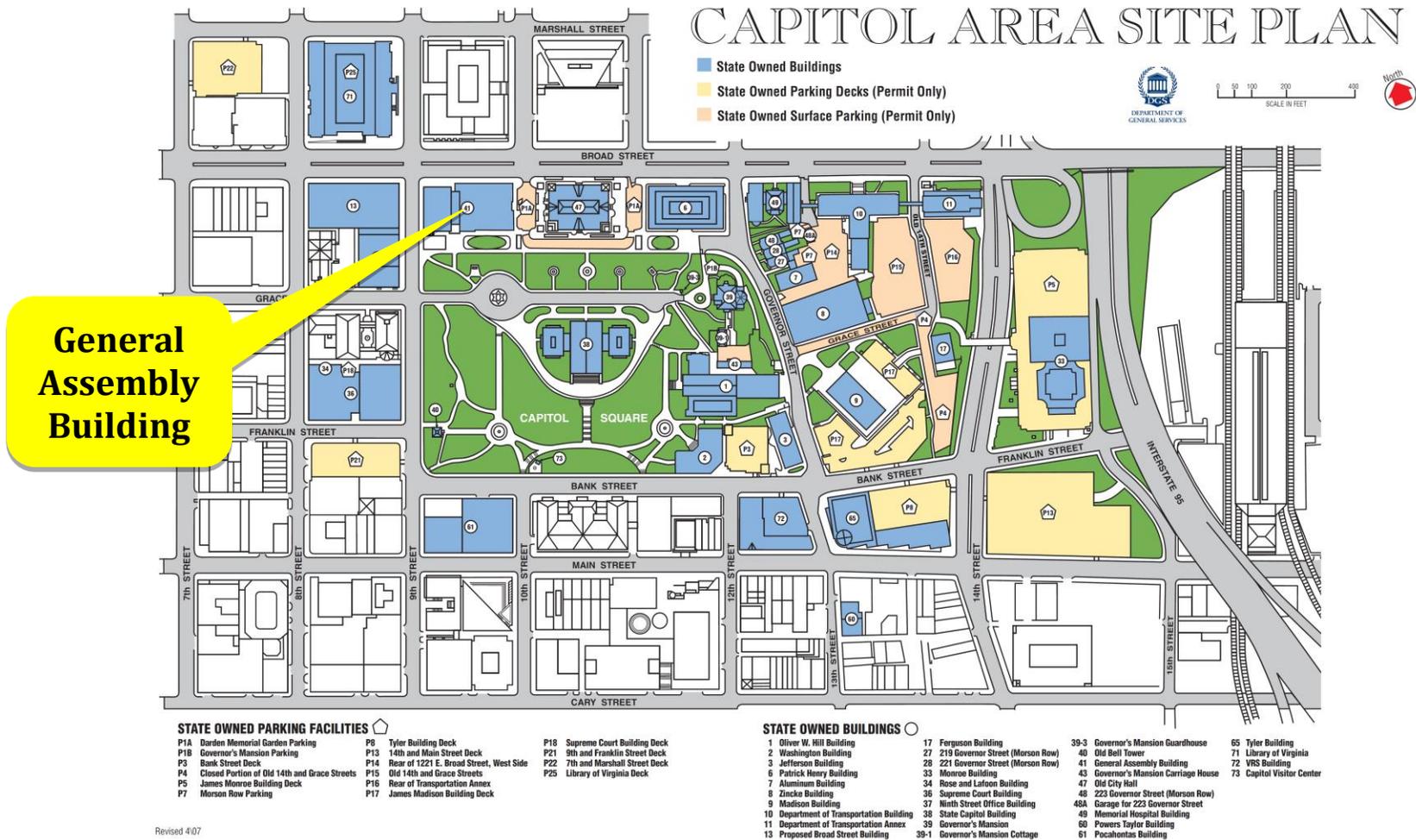


Figure 1. Capital Area Site Plan. Source: Department of General Services, Historic Richmond.



Figure 2. Aerial view of General Assembly Building. Source: Style Weekly, 2014.



Figure 3. View of General Assembly Building from Capital Square. Source: Style Weekly, 2014.



Figure 4. View of Capitol Square in Richmond, 1923. Accession # 92-74811. Prints and Photographs, Library of Virginia.

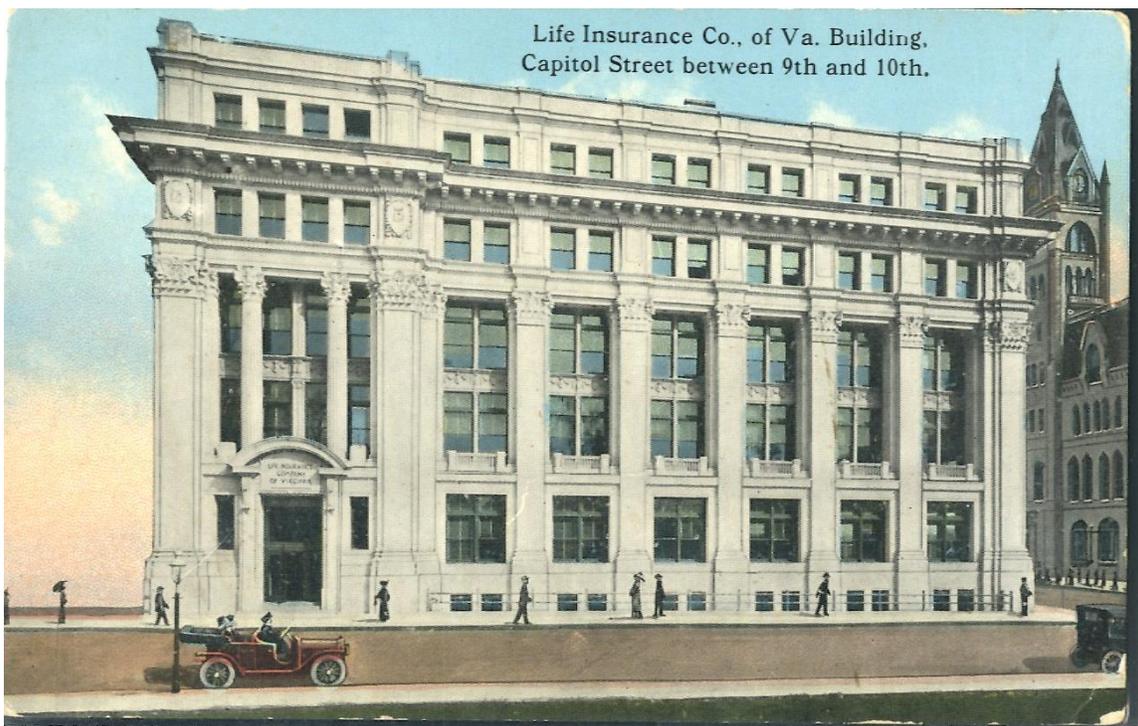


Figure 5. Postcards: Life Insurance Company of Virginia, undated.



Figure 6. Detail of Corinthian pilasters with American eagles, cherubs, and winged horses. Source: Historic Richmond, 2015.



Figure 7. Detail of Corinthian pilasters with American eagles, cherubs, and winged horses. Source: Historic Richmond, 2015.



Figure 8. Marcellus Wright and Partners addition, construction 1965. Source: Historic Richmond, 2015.

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- i Fiske Kimball, Ed. By Jon Kukla assisted by Martha C. Vick and Sarah Shields Driggs, *The Capitol of Virginia; A Landmark of American Architecture* (Published for the General Assembly of Virginia by the Virginia State Library and Archives, Richmond, 1989), pages 7-8.
- ii Ibid., pages 11-12.
- iii Ibid., page 15.
- iv The construction date has been recorded as both 1906 and 1912 however, the building permit for the five-story structure indicates 1912 as its construction year. See Richmond (Va.). Bureau of Permits and Inspections. Building Permit Application, Architectural Blueprints and Specifications, and Associated Index, 1907–1976. Local Government Records Collection, Library of Virginia. Reel # 289. Note also that the *Richmond Times-Dispatch* printed an advertisement by the Life Insurance Company of Virginia in which they announced that the new building would be completed in 1912. See Life Insurance Company of Virginia, *Richmond Times-Dispatch*, October 1, 1911, page 6.
- v Stately Improvements by Edwin Slipek, *Style Weekly*, June 4, 2014.
- vi John E. Wells, Robert E. Dalton, *The Virginia Architects 1834-1855, A biographical dictionary*, New South Architectural Press, Richmond, VA 1997, pages 37-38.
- vii Virginia Historic Landmarks Commission: Historic District Survey Form. File #: 127-744. Surveyed by Land and Community Associates, January 1990.
- viii Calder Loth, Senior Architectural Historian for the Virginia Department of Historic Resources. One of the ancient Pegasus capitals is preserved in the Capitoline Museum.
- ix Robert P. Winthrop, *Architecture in Downtown Richmond* (Richmond: Junior Board of Historic Richmond Foundation, 1982).
- x Land and Community Associates, “Survey of State Owned Properties: Virginia Department of General Services,” May 1991, page 42.
- xi Ibid.
- xii Virginia Historical Society, *A Guide to the Life Insurance Company of Virginia Records from 1871-1920*.
- xiii Land and Community Associates, “Survey of State Owned Properties: Virginia Department of General Services,” May 1991, page 42.
- xiv Ibid.
- xv Facilities Condition Survey, Renovation Requirements, General Assembly Building by CEGG Associates, 2005.
- xvi William B. O’Neal, *Architecture of Virginia* (Virginia Museum, 1968)
- xvii Virginia Historic Landmarks Commission: Historic District Survey Form File #:127-744. Surveyed by Robert Winthrop, June 21, 1980.
- xviii World Monuments Fund, *5 Case Studies Modernism at Risk*, 2010.
- xix IBM Archives.
- xx Stately Improvements by Edwin Slipek. *Style Weekly*. June 4, 2014.

Photographs and Other Sources (not included in the endnotes):

“An Overview of the City Beautiful Movement as Reflected in Daniel Burnham’s Vision.” By Richard Klein.
http://academic.csuohio.edu/tah/regional_arts/artsh heritage/p61anoverview.pdf

Advertisement, *Richmond Times-Dispatch*, August 12, 1913.

-Ad that shows the growth and success of the life insurance company in a short amount of time.