

# HISTORIC ROOTS

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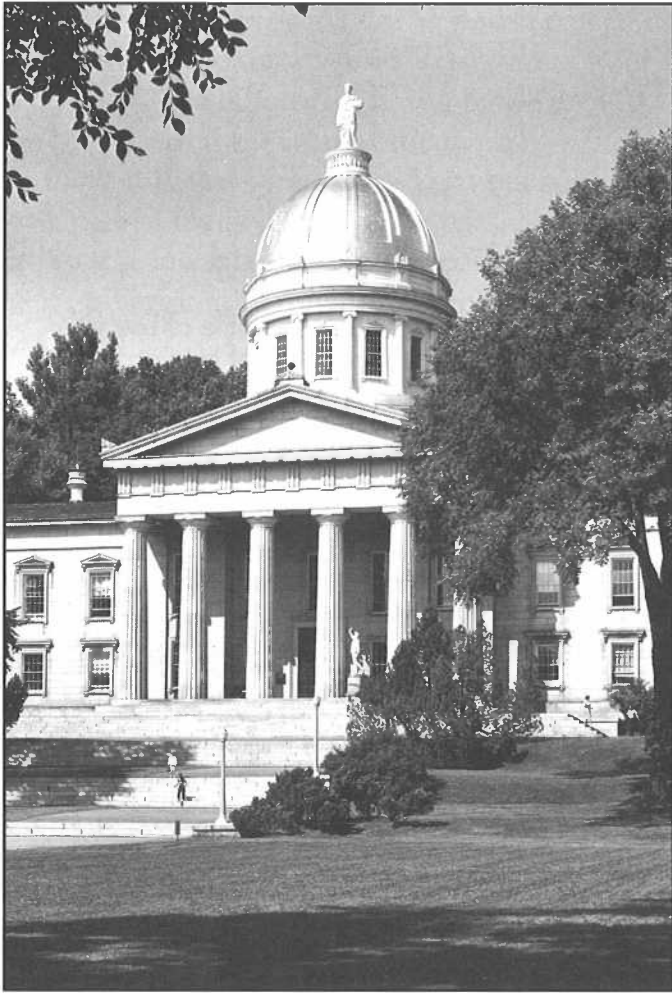
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Vermont Development Department

*The Vermont State House in Montpelier*

# THE VERMONT STATE HOUSE

By JULIE BRESSOR

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The Vermont State House, in Montpelier, stands on a hillside, set back from busy State Street. Its 57-foot dome is covered with more than three pounds of gold leaf. The State House is both a museum and an office building and belongs to the people of Vermont. Here the Legislature, made up of the State Senate and the House of Representatives, meets to pass laws that affect what happens in our lives now and in the future. The building itself and much of what is in it tells a lot about Vermont's past. To visit the State House is to be surrounded by the flow of history.

Made of granite that was quarried and finished in Barre, the building on State Street is actually the state's third State House. For the first 28 years of Vermont's history, from 1777 until 1805, legislators met in different places around the state. But a government on the move cost too much and did not work very well.

Many towns wanted to be the state capital. Montpelier won because it was in the center of

the state and because the people who lived there agreed to raise the \$10,000 needed to build the capitol building.<sup>1</sup>

The first State House in Montpelier was used for only 30 years. The three-story wooden building was too small, for one thing, and legislators damaged it, whittling away the pine benches during long winter sessions.

The second State House, although it was much larger and made of granite, lasted even less time. Built in 1837, it burned down in January 1857. There were no fire trucks then, no pumps or hoses to bring water from the Winooski River. People worked hard to save the building by throwing chunks of snow on the fire, but some books, papers, and furniture, and a large portrait of George Washington were all they could rescue.

The third State House was finished in 1859. It used the six huge granite columns that were left from the second building, but it was much bigger. Like the second, it was built in the style of Greek and Roman buildings, as are many government buildings all over the world. This is because Greece and Rome, in ancient times,<sup>2</sup>

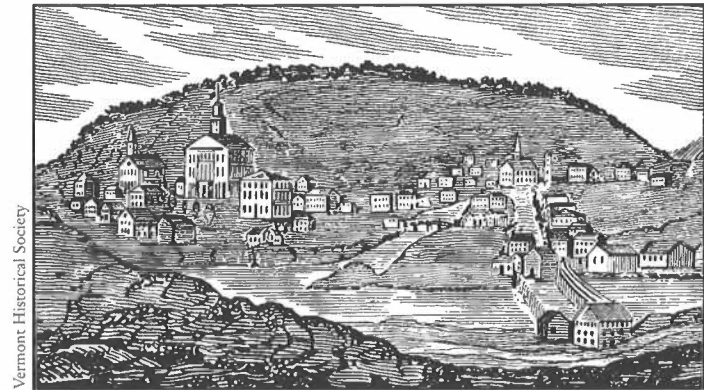
<sup>1</sup> Notice the difference between the words “capital” and “capitol.” “Capital” means the city or town where the government is. “Capitol” is the building where the legislature meets.

<sup>2</sup> Ancient (ain-she-ent) means very, very old. The period we’re talking about here was from about 480 BC until about 200 AD.

developed many of the ideas about democracy and government that we still use today.

The statue at the top of the State House dome is Roman too and has been there since 1938. It is of Ceres (pronounced “series”, as in “World Series”), the Roman goddess of farming. The wooden statue replaced an older one damaged by years of exposure to Vermont weather. When the old statue came down, people who worked in the State House said they would make the new one. Sergeant-at-Arms Dwight Dwinell, who was then 87 years old, carved Ceres’ head; two State House janitors carved the body.

As the state government grew, so did the building, and additions were built at the back. Objects of interest were added to the outside as



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*A view of Montpelier in 1821. The large building on the left is the first State House. The Winooski River runs along the front of the picture. Because the city has grown so much, it would be impossible to get such a clear view of downtown Montpelier from this spot today.*

well. There is a marble statue of Ethan Allen at the front door. On the front lawn are cannons from the Spanish-American War in 1898. They are from gunboats captured by Admiral George Dewey in the Battle of Manila Bay. And they were in place on the State House lawn when Admiral Dewey, who was born and raised across the street from the State House, came to Montpelier in 1899 for a day in his honor.

The House and Senate chambers are on the second floor of the State House. Every winter—from January until April or May, lawmakers meet there to plan, discuss, and pass the laws we live by. The Governor also has an office in the State House. He uses it when the Legislature is meeting. His main office is next door at 109 State Street.

There is a lot to see inside the State House. On the high wall at the front of the House Chamber, where State Representatives meet,



*The second State House.*

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*The wooden statue of the goddess of Agriculture, of which this is a drawing, rotted after standing out in Vermont weather on top of the State House dome for almost 80 years.*



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*This is the wooden statue of Ceres that now stands on the State House dome. It was carved by Dwight Dwinell and janitors who worked in the State House.*

hangs the portrait of George Washington that was saved from the 1857 fire. In the middle of the ceiling of this beautiful room, with its white walls and red carpet and seats, is a huge bronze and gold chandelier.<sup>3</sup> It is 14 feet high and 10 feet across. It used to be lit by gas, but now it uses electric light bulbs. There is a smaller chandelier in the Senate Chamber.

The Cedar Creek Room is named for a very large picture (20 feet by 10 feet) of the

<sup>3</sup> Chandelier (shan-de-leer) comes from a French word that means a large lighting fixture that hangs from the ceiling.

<sup>4</sup> Armies retreat when they are forced back by the forces of the other side; they rally when they stop moving backward and start to move forward again against the enemy.

Battle of Cedar Creek in Virginia in 1864, where Vermont soldiers helped turn a Union retreat into a rally.<sup>4</sup> This room was once the State Library but is now used for parties.

The Governor's Office has been made to look the way it did when the building was first built. The Governor's chair is of wood taken from the *USS Constitution*. This ship, better known as "Old Ironsides," is now in Boston harbor, where people can visit it. It was built in 1796 and is famous because it was the lead ship in two important battles of the War of 1812 against England. After the War of 1812 England gave up trying to recapture its former colonies in America.

### **Rooting Around**

If you want to know more about the State House and the Legislature, check your local library. It may have a video called "Our State House" that shows you around the building and explains how our laws are made.