Visitor Information

The Virginia State Capitol

The Capitol Square is a public park that changes with the seasons, the General Assembly Sessions, and the bustle of Richmond’s vibrant downtown.

Visitors to the Capitol from France, 1796

Beginning in January of each year, the Square pulses with activity as legislatures from all parts of Virginia convene to conduct the business of the people.

Throughout the year, visitors enjoy the magnificent grounds, walkways, monuments and magic of the historic Square. School children and tourists from around the globe use the Square as a starting point to visit downtown and statewide historical attractions.

Operating Hours

The Capitol building is open to visitors Monday through Saturday 9:00 a.m. to 5:00 p.m., and Sundays from 1:00 p.m. to 5:00 p.m. Capitol Square is open to the public from 6:00 a.m. until 11:00 p.m. daily.

Tours

Free one-hour guided tours begin Monday through Saturday no later than 10:00 a.m. for walk-in visitors (9:00 a.m. for groups by appointment), with the last tour starting at 4:00 p.m. On Sunday, guided tours are available beginning at 1:00 p.m., with the last tour starting at 4:00 p.m. In addition, self-guided tours are available during operating hours each day. Closed Thanksgiving, Christmas, and New Year’s Day.

Individuals and smaller groups are invited to tour the Capitol on their own or with a tour guide. Guided tours for groups of 10 or more may be arranged by calling Capitol Guides at (804) 698-1788.

Virtual Tours of the Capitol and Grounds are available at virginiacapitol.gov/virtualtours. The Capitol’s introductory film “Keepers of the Flame” is available for viewing on site and on demand at https://virginiacapitol.gov/kotf

Visitor Information

Visitors enter the Capitol at the Main Entrance at 10th and Bank Streets.

Capitol Gift Shop

Located in the Capitol Extension, near the Main Entrance. Monday - Saturday, 10:00 a.m. - 4:00 p.m., closed Sunday. (804) 698-7661

Meriwether’s Cafe

Located in the Capitol Extension, serving breakfast, lunch, and snacks. Monday - Friday, 8:30 a.m. - 3:00 p.m. (804) 698-7692

Executive Mansion

Home of Virginia’s Governor and First Family since 1813, the Executive Mansion is the oldest governor’s residence still used for its original purpose. Guided tours are available on a limited basis and vary according to the season. Call (804) 371-8687 for more information or to schedule a group tour.

*Times subject to change

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“Whenever the people are well informed, they can be trusted with their own government.” Thaddeus Stevens

It All Began in Virginia

American self-government began in Jamestown, Virginia, in 1619, and it continues to thrive at the Capitol today.

The Virginia General Assembly convenes here annually on the second Wednesday in January for 60 calendar days in even-numbered years, 45 days in odd-numbered years. Citizen legislators represent the interests of over eight million Virginians.

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Forty State Senators are elected for four-year terms. The Lieutenant Governor is the President and presiding officer of the Senate. The Senate elects a senior member as President pro tempore and the Clerk, who serves at the pleasure of the Senate. The House of Delegates has 100 members, who are elected every two years. The Speaker of the House is elected from and by the membership, and the Clerk is elected by the membership, each for a two-year term.

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Jefferson's Architectural Vision

It was 1785, two months into his tenure as Ambassador to France, when Thomas Jefferson agreed to help design Virginia's Capitol—from after inspired by the Maison Careix in Nîmes, France, and based on classical Roman temple design. The first session of the Virginia General Assembly met in two frame warehouses during the winter of 1784–1785, and the newly designed and built Virginia Capitol, atop Shockoe Hill, is made of brick and covered with stucco. Its Ionic columns on the South Portico inspired the modern civic center competition. Jefferson’s design was selected in 1789 when Patrick Henry was governor. The completed building became a centerpiece for the city and state. In 2013, Virginia's Capitol was featured in a nationwide television documentary that restated an extensive panel of historians and architects who had chosen it as one of “10 Buildings that Changed America.”

A Home for Virginia’s General Assembly

The first session of the Virginia legislature took place in Jamestown in 1619, a year before the first Pilgrims arrived in Plymouth, Massachusetts. The legislature met in churches, homes, a college, taverns and statehouses in Jamestown and Williamsburg for 160 years. In 1780 the capital was moved to Richmond. The General Assembly met in two frame warehouses during the winter of 1784–1785, and the newly designed and built Virginia Capitol, atop Shockoe Hill, is made of brick and covered with stucco. Its Ionic columns on the South Portico inspired the modern civic center competition. Jefferson’s design was selected in 1789 when Patrick Henry was governor. The completed building became a centerpiece for the city and state. In 2013, Virginia's Capitol was featured in a nationwide television documentary that restated an extensive panel of historians and architects who had chosen it as one of “10 Buildings that Changed America.”

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The Virginia State Capitol, created by the Virginia General Assembly during the Civil War period as a new city. The first statehouse designed as the New Republic, it inspired countless public buildings for over 200 years. The Capitol was designated a National Historic Landmark in 1962.

Notable Visitors to Capitol Square

Included among the hundreds of thousands of visitors to Capitol Square are many historical figures and notable personalities. Three days after the famous “Iron Curtain” speech, Winston Churchill presented General Dwight D. Eisenhower with a speech to a joint session of the General Assembly in 1946.

Andrew Jackson, Washington State Senator, Lawrence Atkinson and Washington Irving were speakers and witnesses to the trials of Aaron Burr in 1807. Chief Justice John Marshall presided.

The Maryland Toleration Act, a revolutionary bill, was made a full code of Virginia by an Act of Assembly in 1670. The sculptural portrait bust of Lord Fairfax, once part of the 1728 Capitol, is now located in the Capitol Rotunda.

President George Washington, Zachary Taylor, Millard Fillmore, James K. Polk, Abraham Lincoln, Theodore Roosevelt, William Taft and Gerald Ford were some notable visitors to their offices.

Thomas Jefferson, James Madison, James Monroe, William Henry Harrison, John Tyler, Woodrow Wilson, Dwight Eisenhower and Bill Clinton visited the Capitol before or after their presidencies. Other notable visitors include Charles Dickens, Charles Lindbergh, Lady Astor, Henry James, Franklin Delano Roosevelt, Daniel Webster, Theodor Roosevelt, Jefferson Davis, John Jonas Audubon, Muhammad Ali, Margaret Thatcher, Vice President Al Gore and Queen Elizabeth II. A Namn Fit to Be A Queen

In 1634, the word “Virginia” was suggested for the new Virginia Colony by a member of the Virginia Company of London. The name was chosen because it was considered to be a “new world” compared to the “Old World.”

What is a “Commonwealth”?

A “Commonwealth” is a government based on the consent of the people and guided by the rule of law. Virginia evolved from a Royal Colony into a Commonwealth with a new written constitution in 1776. Massachusetts, Pennsylvania and Kentucky also are Commonwealths.

Who Built the Capitol?

The Capitol was built between 1786 and 1816 by a group of talented men and women. Assembled record that identifies materials to be local and to include art at the request of the commissioners, which was designed and built over 20 years.


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Creating Constitutions

The Constitution of the U.S. and the Virginia Constitution are examples of creating new constitutions. The Virginia Constitution was the first written constitution adopted by a people. It established the country’s first Constitution. The Constitution of Virginia is a written document that sets forth the basic principles of government for the Commonwealth of Virginia. It defines the powers of the state government and the rights of its citizens.

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