

# Georgia Capitol Self-Guided Tour

Updated August 22, 2011

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*Begin your tour in the Capitol Rotunda located in the very center of the building.*

## **Building the Capitol**

The Georgia Capitol is the center of state government in Georgia. Atlanta became the official capital city of Georgia in 1868. Prior to 1868 Georgia's capital cities were Savannah, Augusta, Louisville, and Milledgeville. The city fathers of Atlanta encouraged the move as a way to rebuild the city after the Civil War. Atlanta was attractive to state officials due to the location of major train lines. After fifteen years of meeting in the Kimball Opera House on Marietta Street, Georgia's government decided it was time to have a proper Capitol building. Construction of this building began in 1883 and would last another 6 years.

On July 4, 1889 construction of the Georgia Capitol was complete and the building opened. The budget for the building was \$1 million and thanks to prudent spending the Capitol commission was able to return a little over \$100 back to the State Treasury. Many of the materials in the building are native to Georgia including the different kinds of marble and most of the wood work. The outside of the building, however, is constructed of Indiana limestone, because Georgia marble at the time was too expensive.

Designed by the architects Franklin Burnham and Willoughby Endbrooke from Chicago, the Capitol building highlights the democratic ideal of transparency in government. This can be seen through the wide open spaces and the large windows that allow visitors to see into several executive offices.

The design of the Capitol is also noteworthy for its basic similarity to the national Capitol in Washington, D.C. By selecting a similar design, the post Civil War Georgia government reaffirmed its ties and loyalties to the federal government.

Mostly undecorated when it opened in 1889, the Capitol has become a place where we honor men and women through portraits, plaques, and sculptures placed throughout the building and around the grounds.

## **Rotunda**

From the rotunda you can see from one end of the building to another. You are standing directly underneath the famous gold dome and the statue of Miss Freedom that stands on top of it. The dome was not always gold like it is now. In 1958, the people of Dahlonega, Georgia, donated the gold to gild the dome to publicize the fact that the first gold rush in the United States happened in their community. They donated 40 oz of gold at that time, which was quickly transformed into a thin layer and applied. The dome has been re-gilded twice since that time.

Beneath your feet are glass tiles that originally brought light to government agencies located on the first floor. Original elements of energy efficiency are found throughout the building. Today lights have been placed under the glass panels to bring light into the rotunda. Updates throughout the building illustrate the most recent renovation to the Capitol that began in the late 1990s. What you see right now is very close to how the building would have looked in 1889. The original light fixtures were replaced with fluorescent globes in the 1950s and during the recent renovation light fixtures

based on photographs were reproduced. The Capitol was lit with gas lamps when it first opened. Electricity was available, but the inability to power such a large building at that time in Atlanta may have kept it gas powered.

In the rotunda you see portraits of both national heroes and famous Georgians. Can you recognize the top four portraits? These four portraits along with the portrait of Oglethorpe on the bottom row pre-date the building by about 60 years and were brought from the Milledgeville Capitol after the Civil War. Celebrating these national heroes re-emphasizes the use of the Capitol as a place of reconciliation with the north. Keep in mind, however, that the portraits placed on the bottom row honor Georgians who were involved intimately in the Confederacy. Robert Toombs served as Secretary of State for the Confederacy and Alexander Stephens was its Vice President. Keeping alive a dual heritage-both federal and confederate- became a part of the Capitol's history. Take some time to explore the busts around the Rotunda and find out the significance of these men.

## **Second Floor**

*Head south from the rotunda, between the portraits of Washington and Franklin, and investigate the memorial to Mary Latimer McLendon. From there locate the large portrait of John Brown Gordon, who was the governor of Georgia in 1889 when this building was opened. He is also honored on the Capitol grounds in Atlanta's only equestrian statue. From Gordon walk around the outside of the rotunda until you find the portrait of Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. It is located on the north side of the Capitol. As you walk read about some of the offices and portraits you pass.*

When the Capitol was completed all three branches of state government were located in this building. This floor was designated as the executive floor because it housed the Governor and Secretary of State's office and in 1946 the newly created Office of the Lieutenant Governor. Notice how you can see right into the offices. This was to signify the transparency of our executive offices in Georgia. There are also no private exits out of this building. Elected officials must leave through the public exits. Governor Eugene Talmadge was known for occasionally trying to avoid the public and press by climbing out his office windows. Today, we display portraits of former governors on this floor. On your way here you passed a portrait of Jimmy Carter, the only Georgian to become President of the United States.

This is also where we honor Georgia native Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. He grew up less than two miles away from the Capitol on Auburn Avenue and went to school at Morehouse College, which is also very close to the Capitol. We are not sure if Dr. King ever entered the Capitol. During most of his life African-Americans could not freely enter the Capitol. He spent his adult life fighting against this kind of discrimination and by the time of his death in 1968, 10 African Americans were serving in Georgia's General Assembly. In 1974, Jimmy Carter brought in a portrait of Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. to symbolize the changing make up of Georgia Government.

*Walk back to the large staircase in the North Atrium.*

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## **Georgia Capitol Museum**

A Department of the University of Georgia Libraries

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One of the nicknames of the Georgia Capitol is the People's House. One of the reasons it has this nickname is the relative ease to reserve space to hold a press conference, meeting, speech, or ceremony. This area that we call the north atrium is a popular location for concerts and ceremonies throughout the year. If you look above you, you can see the Capitol's clerestory windows and you can notice the window's ability to light this space even on an overcast day.

*To get to our next stop take the staircase up and head to the left. Once on the third floor turn left and look for the entrance to the House Chamber on your right. If the door is open please proceed inside. If the door is closed you should first try the Senate Chamber located on the other side of the Rotunda. If both doors are locked head up to the fourth floor and peek in through the gallery doors.*

## **Third Floor, Legislative Chambers**

The third floor is known as the legislative floor and it is where our legislators gain access to both the House and Senate chambers. The General Assembly is made up of 56 Senators and 180 Representatives. They serve during a legislative session that begins every year on the second Monday of January and lasts 40 working days, usually finishing by the end of March.

While in the chamber legislators are able to vote from their desks using the buttons you see on the brass plates. In each chamber the leader of that chamber (House: Speaker; Senate: Lieutenant Governor/President) sits in the very front and looks on the rest of the chamber's members. To the leaders left sits the leader in waiting and to their right sits a chaplain for the day.

Like in the rest of the Capitol, the chambers have been renovated to look like they did in 1889. The chambers were decorated in a refined Victorian style as shown in the extensive stencil work, coved ceilings, and patterned carpet. All the light fixtures are reproductions of the originals. The two fire places in each chamber were used to heat the room, but keep in mind that when this building was opened the legislative session was held in late summer, so warming the room was probably not a priority. A special press section is built into the back of each chamber and the public gallery above the chamber is open during the session.

*If you have enough time, try to visit both chambers and notice differences in design and set up. One difference that is not apparent is seating assignments. In the house the Speaker places members where he or she wants them; in the Senate members are sat according to their district regardless of party or seniority.*

On your way to the Senate chamber from the House chamber you should notice the portrait of a very relaxed Tom Watson, who is also portrayed in a sculpture in the walk to the main entrance of the Capitol, and Leroy Johnson, who in 1962 became the first African American legislator in Georgia in over 50 years.

*Once you have seen the chambers on the third floor walk up any of the corner stairways to the fourth floor.*

## **Fourth Floor, Georgia Capitol Museum**

*Once on the fourth floor find the model of Miss Freedom.*

If you look across the south atrium back down to the third floor you will see the entrance to what was once the Georgia Supreme Court. The Supreme Court moved across the street in the 1950s and ended the Capitol's monopoly on the three branches. Today the old courtroom serves as the General Assembly's Appropriations Committee room.

The fourth floor has been home to a museum since 1891. At that time the State Geologist was required to present geological specimens to promote Georgia's natural resources. In the 1930s, a new director began to include taxidermy specimens along with geology. By the 1990s the fourth floor had become a crowded natural history museum with little focus. During the renovation everything was moved out and the current exhibition was designed to showcase the Capitol and Georgia government. Take some time to explore the museum and learn even more about the events that have taken place in the Georgia Capitol.

Some highlights include: a description of the Capitol's time capsule; two dioramas from the 1939 World's Fair, Governors' artifacts, and a case featuring many of Georgia's state symbols.

***We hope you have enjoyed your time at the Capitol. If you would like to learn more try one of our other Capitol Exploration Guides located at the Tour Desk.***

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