

A Visit To The Capitol In Washington

by Lynne Belluscio

This year, the Historical Society is planning a trip to Washington to visit the United States Capitol to see the painting of Henry Clay that we donated to the Senate. The painting has been hung in the West stairway designed by Constantino Brumidi. The stairway, by coincidence, is off the West Corridor in which hangs a fresco titled "Bellona, the Roman Goddess of War." (If you remember your history of LeRoy, you know that LeRoy was officially named Bellona in the early 1800s.

When the War of 1812 broke out, the folks in Bellona didn't like being named for a goddess of war and petitioned the New York State Legislature to change the name to LeRoy.) The fresco was painted by Brumidi as part of his designs for the Capitol.

In 1850, the Capitol needed additional rooms to accommodate offices & meeting spaces. In 1855, Captain Montgomery Meigs, Engineer of the Capitol Extensions, hired Brumidi to create designs for the Senate corridors. Brumidi had left his native Italy and emigrated to America because of political turmoil in his native land. He arrived in New York City in 1852 and became a United States citizen five years later.

In 1856, the classically trained artist began creating designs for the Senate corridors, based on a loggia by Raphael in the Vatican. Constantino Brumidi worked in the Capitol for over 25 years, painting frescos and designing bronze railings and other art in the Capitol. He has been called the Michelangelo of the Capitol. His allegorical painting entitled "The Apotheosis of George Washington" is located in the eye of the Rotunda dome.

Brumidi died in 1880. He was recorded to have said that "I have no longer any desire for fame or fortune. My one ambition and my daily prayer is that I may live long enough to make beautiful the Capitol of the one Country one earth in which there is liberty." The portrait of Henry Clay



is framed by the famed bronze stairway designed by Brumidi.

While researching the Capitol, I found it interesting that Henry Clay was the first person to lie in state in the Rotunda on July 1, 1852. I also learned that the cast iron for the Capitol dome was provided by the New York company of Janes, Fowler and Kirtland.

Of the 65 Senators from New York State, one was related to the LeRoy family. Jacob LeRoy (who lived in LeRoy House) had a brother Daniel (who lived in LeRoy for a while and owned a millinery shop on Main Street). Daniel married Susan Fish whose brother was Hamilton Fish. He served as United States Senator from 1851 until 1857. The other Senator from New York was William Seward from Auburn. Hamilton Fish was named for Alexander Hamilton, a friend of his father. Fish had a notable career, serving as the 16th Governor of New York in 1849. He was a member of a moderate anti-slavery group and campaigned for the

election of Abraham Lincoln. He served as Secretary of State under Ulysses S. Grant.

The Historical Society's trip to Washington will be leaving on Tuesday, September 22. We will spend the entire day, Wednesday in Washington with private tours of the Capitol, although you may have the day on your own. We have a block of rooms reserved at the Holiday Inn at Chantilly, Virginia. The group will return on Thursday, through Gettysburg, where a tour of the newly opened David Willis House is scheduled. There are about 20 seats available on the bus. If you are interested in

joining us for this historical visit to Washington, contact the office and I will send you additional information - 768-7433.

Fifty years ago this week, on July 4, 1959, President Dwight D. Eisenhower laid the cornerstone for the long-planned East Front extension of the U.S. Capitol. The event marked the 108th anniversary of the cornerstone laid by President Millard Fillmore for the expansion in the 1850s. Eisenhower used the same trowel President George Washington used to lay the original Capitol cornerstone in 1793. The East Front extension was completed in 1962.

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