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**Constantino Brumidi,**  
by Mathew Brady, ca. 1866.

The Italian-born artist devoted a 25-year span of his career to decorating the public and private spaces of the U.S. Capitol.

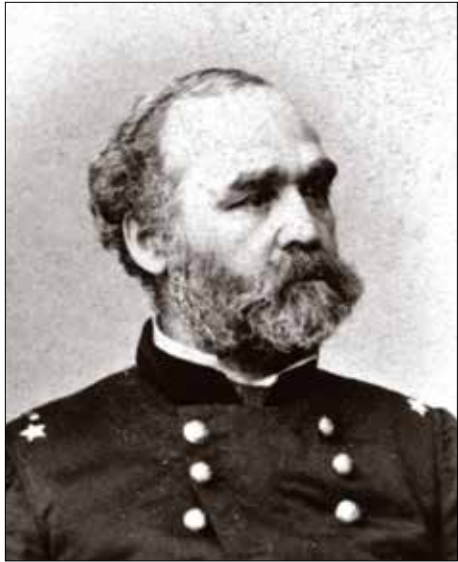


# *The Engineer and the Artist*

MONTGOMERY C. MEIGS, CONSTANTINO BRUMIDI, AND THE CAPITOL FRESCOES

*Donald A. Ritchie*

Montgomery C. Meigs, the military engineer in charge of constructing the new Senate and House wings of the U.S. Capitol, photographed the fresco painter Constantino Brumidi in 1859. It had been four years since Meigs had hired Brumidi, whom Meigs described in his journal as an artist “full of genius and talent,” able to design “with a fertility which is astonishing to me.”<sup>1</sup> The engineer and the artist had collaborated to decorate the interiors of the expanded Capitol. Meigs’ vision and Brumidi’s skill endowed the building with its distinguished appearance, from the vivid colors and patterns selected for the tiled floors to the elaborate murals designed for the ceilings and walls. Meigs and Brumidi’s partnership would soon end—for political reasons—but Brumidi would devote much of the next 20 years to the work he had begun under Meigs’ supervision.



U.S. Senate Collection



Architect of the Capitol

**Far left: Montgomery Cunningham Meigs, 1861.**

This photograph appears in the Brumidi family album.

**Left: Constantino Brumidi, 1859.**

Meigs' journal includes this photograph he took of the artist.

**Opposite: President's Room.**

The room illustrates Meigs' preference to give the Capitol extension elaborate interiors.

Their relationship is well documented, thanks to the journal that Meigs kept, although it was long inaccessible for scholarship because Meigs had recorded his thoughts in the Pitman style of shorthand. In the 1990s, the U.S. Senate Bicentennial Commission funded an extensive translation of the journal and employed the Senate's last reporter of debates to use Pitman shorthand, William D. Mohr. Published as *Capitol Builder: The Shorthand Journals of Montgomery C. Meigs, 1853–1859, 1861*, the journal records Meigs' multiple engineering duties and supervisory functions, as well as how he came to employ the talented Italian-born fresco and mural painter.

Born in 1816 in Augusta, Georgia, Montgomery Cunningham Meigs moved as a child with his family to Philadelphia. He was educated there at the school of the Franklin Institute and for a year at the University of Pennsylvania. At age 16, he entered the U.S. Military Academy at West Point, where he graduated fifth in his class in 1836 and then entered the Army Corps of Engineers. Meigs' mother recalled that, as a child, he was "high tempered, unyielding, tyrannical towards his brothers; very persevering in pursuit of anything he wishes."<sup>2</sup> Meigs later acknowledged that this portrait of the boy remained true of the man.

Meigs came to Washington, D.C., in 1852 to conduct a survey of how water from the Potomac River could be channeled via aqueducts from north of Great Falls into the city. He arrived in the midst of public controversy over the construction of the Capitol extension project. Crowded with additional members representing the new states entering the Union, Congress had authorized the enlargement of the Capitol, and President Millard Fillmore had appointed a professional architect, Thomas U. Walter of Philadelphia, to design the new wings. Accusations soon arose over the mishandling of contracts. Congress investigated and exonerated Walter, but the general superintendent of the project, Samuel Strong, resigned. Meanwhile, the Whig administration of Millard Fillmore was coming to an end, and a Democratic president, Franklin Pierce, would soon take office. Pierce concluded that a military engineer should be put in charge of the management of the Capitol extension. Consequently, in March of 1853, the construction project shifted to the War Department, headed by the new secretary of war, Jefferson Davis.

Secretary Davis had first put Captain Meigs in charge of building the Washington aqueduct and then saw him as the ideal person to supervise the Capitol construction. Combining technical skills with moral uprightness,

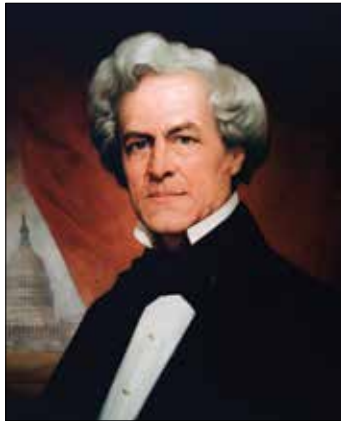
Architect of the Capitol



Meigs was also a Democrat in an army laden with Whig officers. With Davis' full support, Meigs simultaneously supervised the Washington aqueduct, the Capitol extension and new dome, the Post Office building expansion, and the construction of Fort Madison in Annapolis. "The management of all these works," he noted dryly, "give [sic] me ample employment."<sup>3</sup> These multiple projects required him to spend vast amounts of government money, and he was determined to do so honestly and without scandal. Once Meigs took charge of the Capitol extension, Thomas

Walter was able to concentrate on architectural planning. But Walter would soon chafe at working under a strong-willed army officer. It particularly irked him that Meigs did not bother to consult with him when commissioning artwork and that Meigs sought only the approval of Secretary of War Davis.

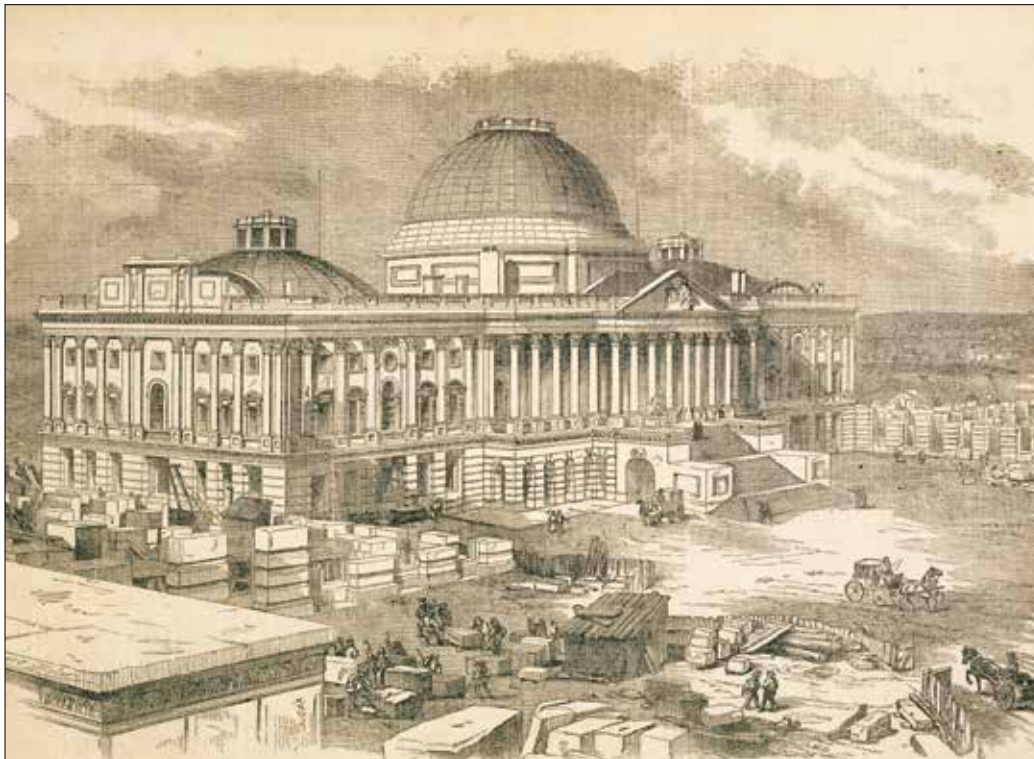
Although Meigs admired Walter's plans for the exterior of the Capitol, he had other ideas for the building's interiors. Most dramatically, Meigs shifted the physical location of the House and Senate chambers away from the windows to the middle of the new wings. In designing the new wings, Walter had envisioned stone floors and plainly painted walls hung with an occasional painting. Meigs instead authorized colorful Minton tiles for the floors and had corridors and committee rooms decorated with murals. As a professional architect, Walter saw himself "contending for the dignity of our Profession against the assumptions and despotism of a military upstart who happens to have the power to annoy."<sup>4</sup> Walter urged his friends in Congress to keep



Architect of the Capitol

**Thomas Ustick Walter,**  
by Francisco Pausas,  
oil on canvas, 1925.

In 1851, President Fillmore approved Walter's plans for enlarging the Capitol and appointed him architect of the Capitol extension.



U.S. Senate Collection

**"Present State of the Capitol at Washington,"**  
*The Illustrated News,*  
engraving, January 8,  
1853.

With construction of the Capitol extension well underway, Walter and Meigs clashed over designs for the interiors.



the Capitol extension “out of the hands of the military.”<sup>5</sup> For his part, Meigs attributed their disputes to the nature of their “involuntary association.”<sup>6</sup>

The army engineer surprised people with his “breadth of design, capacity of minute detail, and refined artistic taste.”<sup>7</sup> Concerned with the appearance of space in the new wings as much as with its use, Meigs sought to educate himself about European wall decorations. He visited art galleries in New York and Philadelphia and consulted art books. He regretted that he had never visited Europe. “I ought to see the great buildings of the Old World before I finish the interior of the Capitol; for while I can form a good idea of the best examples of exterior architecture from drawings and engravings, we have nothing that gives a proper notion of the interior,” he confided in his journal. “I fear that I may make the decoration tawdry instead of elegant, fall into a tavern instead of a palatial style.”<sup>8</sup>

The existing Capitol did not lack decoration, including sculpture and the monumental Revolutionary War scenes painted by John Trumbull. The architecture and decorations of the early Capitol were in a neoclassical style, aiming for a republican form of art that would avoid the European vices of “over-refinement and luxury.”<sup>9</sup> From his own studies in Philadelphia and at West Point, Meigs had come to admire Renaissance styles of architecture and decoration. In 1854, after looking at color plates in an art book of Raphael’s loggia in the Vatican Palace, Meigs reflected: “I have never seen colored engraving of these works before. They are very beautiful, rich and harmonious in color, simple and beautiful in design. I wish I could see the rooms themselves.”<sup>10</sup>

The engineer searched for artists with experience in wall and ceiling murals, but when he found that no American artists had experience with true fresco painting, he looked to European artists. This decision would put Meigs in conflict with the nativist, anti-immigrant, anti-Catholic, Know-Nothing ethos of the 1850s. Although Meigs wanted to promote American art, he was far less interested in nationality than in artistic skill.

At this juncture, Constantino Brumidi offered his services to decorate the Capitol’s interiors. Born in Rome in 1805, Brumidi had studied at the Accademia di San Luca and helped restore frescoes at the Vatican. During the political turmoil of the Italian independence movement, Brumidi was arrested, imprisoned, and pardoned. He then thought it advisable to leave Italy. He arrived in New York in 1852. On December 28, 1854, he came to the Capitol accompanied by a Mr. Stone, likely the Washington physician-turned-sculptor, Horatio Stone, who introduced Brumidi to Meigs. In their first meeting, Meigs did not catch the artist’s name, and so referred to him in his journal simply as a “lively old man” (although Brumidi was only a decade older than Meigs).<sup>11</sup> The artist had just returned from painting an altarpiece in the cathedral of Mexico City, and Meigs noted that Brumidi had “a very red nose, either from Mexican suns or French brandies.”<sup>12</sup> Since Brumidi’s English was rudimentary, the two men carried on their conversation in “bad French on both sides.”<sup>13</sup> Brumidi spoke confidently of his skills and asked for a fresh wall where he could paint a sample of his work. Since Meigs’ office was scheduled to become the House Agriculture Committee Room, Meigs identified a lunette over the entrance and asked Brumidi to plan an allegorical painting on agriculture. The artist said he had other work to do for a church and would be available to paint his sample in March, but Meigs explained that Brumidi’s employment would depend on the members of Congress, who would be leaving the city right after the end of the session in March 1855. Quick to grasp political realities, Brumidi agreed that the church would always be there and that he should paint for the Congress first.

A month later, Brumidi presented an oil sketch of Cincinnatus at the plow—a popular theme of the citizen soldier called from agricultural pursuits to defend his nation. Meigs was taken with Brumidi’s “skill in drawing and composition and coloring, much greater than I expected.”<sup>14</sup> However, when Brumidi enlarged



his sketch to a full-sized drawing, the engineer was disappointed. “I did not think that he had carried out the promise of his sketch,” he noted.<sup>15</sup> The figures now seemed carelessly drawn and out of proportion. Brumidi was not pleased to hear the critique, but Meigs warned him to expect such criticism. American painters were bound to be jealous of him and would “find all the fault they could” with his work.<sup>16</sup> The engineer

worried about the artist’s capabilities. “My Italian friend and fresco painter can no more paint an American than he could a Chinese scene,” he ruminated. “He has no more idea of an Indian . . . than of the troops of the Emperor of Japan.”<sup>17</sup>

Brumidi began making preparations for the fresco on February 14, 1855. The first step was “to wet thoroughly for several days the rough coat of plaster upon



Collection of the U.S. House of Representatives



Architect of the Capitol

Top: Sketch for *Calling of Cincinnatus from the Plow*, oil on canvas, 1855.

Bottom: *Calling of Cincinnatus from the Plow*, fresco, 1855.

Brumidi prepared a preliminary sketch of Cincinnatus at the plow for the room that was assigned to the House Agriculture Committee. After Meigs approved the sketch, Brumidi completed the scene in fresco.

the wall.”<sup>18</sup> By February 19, the first section of plaster was ready, and Meigs watched with fascination as Brumidi mixed his palette, blending the colors with the lime on a slab of marble to create the tints he wanted. Brumidi reminded Meigs that the colors would change as they dried. At 10:30 that morning, the artist began painting. Meigs was surprised to see that Brumidi applied his colors in thick strokes and that the colors did not sink in as quickly as he expected. Meigs expressed his concern that the sky, laid on so thickly, would be too blue. Brumidi responded that he feared that it would prove too light. When Meigs left the office later that afternoon, Brumidi was still at work.

Day by day, the fresco progressed, fascinating the engineer. As Brumidi outlined the next figure, Meigs observed that the painting done the day before had come out with “more force and clearness” than at first.<sup>19</sup> Meigs was relieved to observe that, after three days, the original parts of the fresco showed “much improvement in clearness and beauty.”<sup>20</sup> He also took note that the “mortar seems to set very hard, and it will make a durable wall, and the picture will be as durable as the wall itself.”<sup>21</sup> Meigs invited visitors, especially members of Congress, to come and observe the artist at work. As the visitors streamed in, Brumidi ignored the crowds

and continued painting rapidly. “The work thus far looks very strong and forcible,” Meigs recorded with satisfaction.<sup>22</sup> He was still searching for American artists, but found that they charged “such high prices that I did not see how we could employ them.”<sup>23</sup>

By March 15, 1855, Brumidi had completed *Calling of Cincinnatus from the Plow*. He then outlined his ideas for further projects, including a sketch (which he pronounced “skitch”) of a painting of the four seasons for the Agriculture Committee room ceiling.<sup>24</sup> Meigs felt that it would “make a very beautiful room when finished” and was certain that “nothing so rich in effect” had ever been attempted on the American side of the Atlantic.<sup>25</sup> On the wall facing *Cincinnatus*, Brumidi would paint a companion fresco of General Israel Putnam being called from the plow during the American Revolution. To help the artist deal with American subjects, Meigs checked out from the Library of Congress a copy in Italian of Carlo Botta’s *History of America*. Other scenes for the room included images of reaping by hand and by machine. Both the engineer and the artist shared a fascination with technology, and Meigs arranged for the manager of an agricultural warehouse to show Brumidi one of the latest McCormick reapers so that he could add it to the Agriculture Committee room’s decorations.



*Calling of Putnam from the Plow to the Revolution, fresco, 1855.*

To help Brumidi create authentic American subjects for this mural, Meigs arranged for the Italian-born artist to study McCormick reapers and provided the artist with a book about the American Revolution.







Meigs hired Brumidi and a squad of other artists and artisans with plans to decorate another 80 rooms in the two wings. Meigs designated Brumidi as the “chief conductor” of the artistic projects, putting him on the payroll at a daily rate of \$8, which was then equal to the pay of a member of Congress and the highest pay of any of the artists. Brumidi would do the true frescoes and would supervise the teams of painters handling other decorative elements. In dealing with these craftsmen, Brumidi showed himself to be above the petty jealousies that Meigs had encountered in so many “inferior artists.”<sup>26</sup> Brumidi always seemed willing to praise good work by his assistants and went about his own work “with modesty and propriety” in the face of rising nativist criticism.<sup>27</sup> Brumidi’s work gave Meigs a reference point for measuring the style of other artists and reinforced Meigs’ confidence in his own artistic judgment. It also provided some pleasant diversions from the engineering challenges, financial headaches, and political interference Meigs encountered.

Meigs allowed an American artist, George R. West, to paint battle scenes in the Senate Naval Affairs Committee Room but disliked the result and had them removed. Once West’s scenes were removed, Brumidi then executed the entire mural program. Between them, Meigs and Brumidi would give the

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Capitol “a superior style of decoration in real fresco, like the palaces of Augustus and Nero . . . and the admired relics of the paintings at Herculaneum and Pompeii.”<sup>28</sup> Adopting colors and motifs found in the murals at Pompeii, Brumidi painted images of Neptune and sea nymphs around the room’s ceiling. Outraged critics called it “absurd” and “outrageous” to

paint the room in a “servile, tasteless reproduction of the Pompeian style.”<sup>29</sup> After that experience, Brumidi shied away from exclusively classical themes, incorporating more American imagery and historical scenes in his frescoes.

Not surprisingly, the Capitol construction attracted many job-seeking American artists, who expressed offense at finding Europeans decorating the halls of the U.S. Capitol. Nor were American artists modest about promoting their native-born skills. In February of 1857, an artist from St. Louis assured Meigs that Brumidi’s fresco in the House Agriculture Committee Room was copied from a painting in Florence, and the artist insisted that he could paint something better. Meigs was unimpressed with both the man’s drawings and his protestation that he usually designed as he painted. “This haphazard way of doing work may answer for the west,” Meigs decided, “but in the Capitol I must know what is to be put upon a room before it begins.”<sup>30</sup> Meigs rejected another artist’s sketches for the Senate Library ceiling, regarding the figures as too large for the space, and selected Brumidi’s plans instead. Meigs complained to Emmanuel Leutze, the German who was painting a large mural over the House stairs: “I have been annoyed by pretenders, by quacks, and by scholars. I have not received from any American artist a sketch or design for a picture fit to go into a county court house much less into the Capitol of the United States.”<sup>31</sup>

Aware that critics regarded him as an engineer and “nothing more,” Meigs had a strong desire to use his position “for the advancement of art in this country.”<sup>32</sup> He was not “insensible to the honor of directing such a work as the Capitol,” he told his father in March 1857. “My constructive facility is gratified in mastering its difficulties, in contriving the many machines and processes there used. My taste is gratified in the works of art, and my heart and conscience in the knowledge that, through me, much good flows

Opposite: Senate Appropriations Committee Room.

Brumidi’s Pompeian decorative scheme for this room (originally the Naval Affairs Committee Room) sparked controversy.



to the laborer and to the artist and that to each and all is secured justice and courtesy.”<sup>33</sup>

Trouble loomed when Franklin Pierce left office in 1857 and was replaced in the White House by the indecisive James Buchanan. In the new administration, the patronage-hungry John B. Floyd took over from Jefferson Davis as secretary of war. Davis assured Floyd of Meigs’ many fine qualities: “When the work was transferred to the War Dept. I instituted careful inquiry to find a candidate competent by elementary preparation and practical application to carry on the magnificent project and who to these qualifications would add the moral attributes which would silence such complaints as had arisen both in regard to the purchase and the use of material. Good advice and

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*Davis wrote of Meigs: “Full of resources, above personal jealousy, calm, energetic, obliging, firm, discreet, just, patient to hear and willing to instruct, he soon overcame the prejudice against a military superintendent and acquired the confidence and the good will of the artists and workmen under his charge.”*

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good fortune led me to select Capt. Meigs.”<sup>34</sup> Davis wrote of Meigs: “Full of resources, above personal jealousy, calm, energetic, obliging, firm, discreet, just, patient to hear and willing to instruct, he soon overcame the prejudice against a military superintendent and acquired the confidence and the good will of the artists and workmen under his charge.”<sup>35</sup>

Rejected artists and American nativists were raising a chorus of dissent over Brumidi’s mythological images in the Capitol and attacked his style as “tawdry and gaudy ornaments, vile in taste, poor in design, and offensive in color” and “inappropriate to a Republic.”<sup>36</sup> The American art establishment blamed Meigs for not hiring more native-born artists. “With

a fuller knowledge of the art-resources of the country,” the editor of one art magazine sniffed, “more satisfactory results could have been effected with the same money.”<sup>37</sup> One hundred and twenty-seven artists, among them such giants as Rembrandt Peale, Albert Bierstadt, and Thomas Sully, successfully petitioned Congress to create an art commission that would supplant Meigs’ authority over art contracts. In May 1859, President Buchanan appointed three artists to the commission. One of the commissioners, Henry Kirke Brown, had submitted a proposal to do the pediment sculpture on the House side of the Capitol, which Meigs had rejected in part because it included a suffering slave sitting on a bale of cotton. Predictably, the art commission prepared a report that had little good to say of Brumidi’s work, blasting the art of “an effete and decayed race which in no way represents us” and the “display of gaudy, inharmonious color” on the walls of the Capitol.<sup>38</sup> Whatever sympathy Congress might have felt for the report’s call for more American art was counteracted by the commission’s extravagant cost estimates for the work it envisioned. That spelled the end of the commission. Meigs commented acidly that the artists had only managed to endanger further congressional funding for art in the Capitol. Since he regarded the decorative mural painting as part of the building’s construction, however, he was able to get the completion of the frescoes in the Senate wing included in the 1860 appropriations bill.

Congressional opinion divided over the Capitol’s artwork. Some members of Congress admired the murals, while others were repelled by them. A mix of ideology and parochialism surfaced in the members’ reactions. One western representative regretted that, in Brumidi’s rendition of General Putnam at the plow, the artist had not shown a more modern western plow. Northern abolitionists thought there should have been some depiction of slave labor in the decorations. Meigs had advised artists to avoid controversial



Constantino Brumidi and his wife, Lola Germon Brumidi, as they appear in the Brumidi family album, ca. 1860–1880.

### The Brumidi Family Photograph Album

Photographic albums enjoyed exceptional popularity in the Victorian era. They were used as memoirs and travelogues and often included images of prominent public figures. Commercially available albums held slots for cartes de visite, a popular and affordable form of photography often used as calling cards because of their small size. These albums became treasured family heirlooms, preserved as a collection and passed down from generation to generation. Mildred Thompson inherited such an album from her great grand-aunt, Lola Germon Brumidi, Brumidi's third wife. Thompson donated the album to the U.S. Senate in 1987.

Very little is known about Brumidi's personal life, and this photographic album provides insight into the artist and his family. The large, leather-bound book, with decorative pre-cut windows for cartes de visite, showcases 122 images of Brumidi, his family, and his friends, as well as paintings he completed outside the Capitol. The album contains images of public figures from Brumidi's time, such as President Lincoln, and it includes the likes of John Wilkes Booth, who performed on stage with Effie Germon, one of Brumidi's relatives. Her picture also appears in the album. Cartes de visite of Montgomery C. Meigs, Jefferson Davis, and Stephen Douglas, supporters of the artist and his efforts in decorating the Capitol, can be found next to more personal images of Brumidi's son Laurence, who matures from a child to a young man as the album pages progress.

themes, and instead of slavery, they had focused attention on Native Americans and western expansion. Brumidi's brightly painted ceiling beams in the new House of Representatives chamber struck some members as gaudy. A New York representative lamented that "Italian taste has exhibited on every side of this Hall the vermilion hue of Italy, instead of the sober, sensible hue of American intellect."<sup>39</sup> "Gaudy?" Meigs struck back. "But what is 'gaudy?' Are the colors of our autumnal forests gaudy?"<sup>40</sup>

Among his critics, Meigs faced renewed hostility from the Capitol architect. Taking advantage of the change in administration, Thomas U. Walter lobbied to remove the army engineer from his supervisory role at the Capitol. Walter admired Brumidi's artistry, but his strife with Meigs led him to publicly criticize the ornate decorations as "inappropriate" for rooms where committee business was supposed to occur. Some of

these rooms were so extravagantly decorated, Walter complained, "that it is painful to remain in them."<sup>41</sup> Through all the flack, Brumidi kept working. Perhaps because he had been imprisoned in Italy for his political activities, he stayed out of the disputes swirling around his work in the Capitol. Brumidi became an American citizen in 1857. In a fresco depicting Cornwallis' surrender to Washington at Yorktown, painted in the House chamber, the artist added: "C. Brumidi Artist Citizen of the U.S."<sup>42</sup> This fresco remained in the House chamber until its 1950 remodeling and was later moved to the Members' Dining Room.

Suffering persistent interference from Secretary of War Floyd over contracts, Meigs protested to James Buchanan, but Meigs concluded that the secretary of war's "brute force of purpose and boldness" had overwhelmed the president's "timid caution and pusillanimity."<sup>43</sup> Buchanan could not settle the Meigs-Walter

*Cornwallis Sues for Cessation of Hostilities under the Flag of Truce (detail), fresco, 1857.*

Brumidi announced his new status as an American citizen with a signature and an inscription on the white strap.



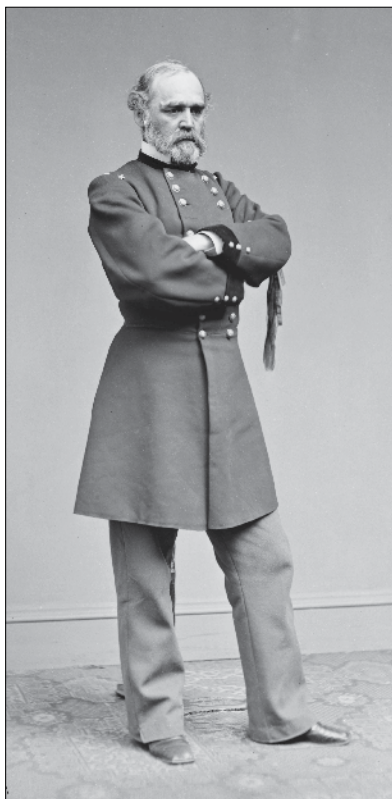
Architect of the Capitol



dispute any more than he could hold the North and South together. In September 1860, Secretary Floyd removed Meigs from his Capitol job and dispatched him to the remote Tortugas to build forts off the Florida coast. Fortunately for Meigs, the Buchanan administration was ending, and in February 1861, he was ordered back to Washington, D.C. On March 4, Abraham Lincoln's inauguration took place in front of the unfinished Capitol dome. Meigs recorded in his diary that "we have at last found that we have a government."<sup>44</sup> President Lincoln was equally impressed with Meigs, whom he made quartermaster general of the Union Army in May of 1861. "I have come to know Colonel Meigs quite well for a short acquaintance," Lincoln wrote, "and so far as I am capable of judging, I do not know one who combines the qualities of masculine intellect, learning and experience of the right sort, and physical power of labor and endurance, so well as he."<sup>45</sup>

Although the war initially halted many Capitol projects, it did not interrupt construction of the new dome. In 1862, authority over the extension and dome was given to Walter, this time under the Interior Department rather than the War Department. With Meigs gone, Walter warmed to Brumidi's work and even hired the artist to paint rooms in his own house. In 1865, Walter commissioned Brumidi to paint the canopy of the Capitol's dome, having altered the architectural design to accommodate a monumental fresco. Brumidi would spend the rest of his career painting murals for the Capitol, many of them based on sketches that Meigs had approved before his banishment to the Tortugas.

General Meigs took pleasure in watching the artist's ongoing efforts. During the Civil War, Meigs assured the secretary of the interior that Brumidi's talents as a historical painter had "no equal in this country."<sup>46</sup> Meigs' only objection came when Brumidi painted Meigs into the scene of "Commerce" in *The Apotheosis*



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**Far left: General Montgomery Cunningham Meigs, ca. 1865.**

**Left: "View of the Capitol, Showing Present State of the Dome.—Taken during the Inauguration of Lincoln, Monday, March 4, 1861," Frank Leslie's Illustrated Newspaper, engraving, March 16, 1861.**

President Lincoln was inaugurated at the Capitol in March 1861. One month later, the Civil War began, and Lincoln appointed Meigs quartermaster general of the Union Army.



of *Washington* in the Rotunda. The engineer asked that his image be removed—fearing that it would open him to ridicule—and the artist complied. Viewing the finished *Apotheosis* in 1866, Meigs assured Brumidi that he found it “most agreeable and beautiful. The perspective is so well managed. . . . The figures appear to take

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*Meigs felt proud of his supervision of the Capitol extension and saw his patronage of the arts as his lasting legacy.*

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their places in space with the illusion of a diorama. I am glad the country at length possesses a Cupola on whose vault is painted a fresco picture after the manner of the great edifices of the old world.”<sup>47</sup>

In defense of Brumidi’s work, Meigs dismissed the critics of the Italian Renaissance style as those “who

do not know that the finest models of architectural decoration, the works of Raphael and Da Vinci [sic], are copied and repeated upon the buildings of England and of this country.”<sup>48</sup> In response to complaints about his insufficient nationalism, Meigs insisted that American artists lagged behind Europeans and failed to “surpass the highest efforts of older centuries.”<sup>49</sup> Meigs felt proud of his supervision of the Capitol extension and saw his patronage of the arts as his lasting legacy. When he took charge of the Capitol project, Meigs pointed out, there had not been a single place designated for a statue. He had commissioned statues and sculptured bronze doors and had sponsored the frescoes for the Capitol’s walls and ceilings. Writing to Brumidi on January 19, 1866, Meigs reflected on the works he had commissioned. “I have, I believe, been able to do much for American art.”<sup>50</sup>

**Right: *The Apotheosis of Washington* (detail), fresco, 1865.**

Brumidi originally included Meigs’ portrait in this scene of “Commerce,” but at Meigs’ insistence, Brumidi removed the likeness; the reworked area can still be discerned to the right of the money sack.

**Opposite: *View of the Rotunda.***

Brumidi’s monumental fresco, *The Apotheosis of Washington*, fills the Rotunda’s canopy.



