



Landscape medallion (detail), Brumidi Corridors.

Brumidi's landscape medallions relate to the federally sponsored *Pacific Railroad Report* and depict scenes from the American West, such as this view of Mount Baker in Washington State.



The “Most Practicable” Route

BRUMIDI’S LANDSCAPES AND THE TRANSCONTINENTAL RAILROAD

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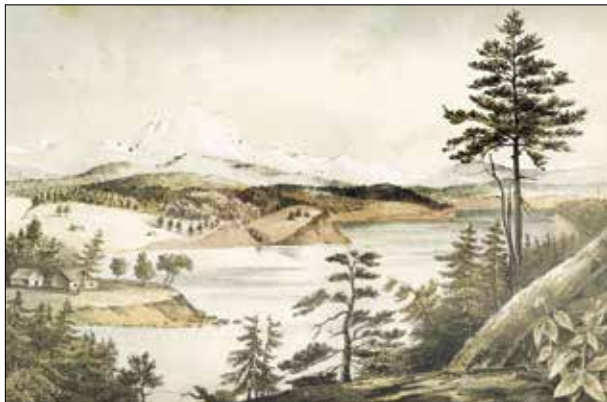
For 150 years, senators, dignitaries, and visitors to the U.S. Capitol have bustled past 8 landscape medallions prominently located in the reception area of the Brumidi Corridors on the first floor of the Senate wing. For most of this time, very little was understood about these scenes of rivers and mountains. The locations depicted in the landscapes and any relevance the paintings once held had long faded from memory. The art of the Capitol is deeply rooted in symbolism and themes that reflect national pride, which strongly suggested that the medallions’ significance extended beyond their decorative value. Ultimately, a breakthrough in scholarship identified the long-forgotten source of the eight landscapes and reconnected them to their historical context: a young nation exploring and uniting a vast continent, as well as a great national issue that was part of this American narrative—the first transcontinental railroad.



Starting in 1857, the Brumidi Corridors in the newly constructed Senate wing of the Capitol buzzed with artistic activity. Development of the mural designs for the Senate’s lobbies and halls fell to artist Constantino Brumidi, under the watchful eye of Montgomery C. Meigs, supervising engineer of the Capitol extension. Both men were deeply invested in imbuing the art of the Capitol with iconography that expressed the national character. Meigs, an accomplished engineer, was also keen to have Brumidi depict new technologies that conferred civic benefit and economic development. Murals portraying inventions in agriculture and industry, innovations in transportation, and the laying of the transatlantic cable appear with great frequency throughout the building.

From roughly 1857 to 1861, Brumidi and his team of artists decorated the expansive Brumidi Corridors with Brumidi’s designs, while one floor above, the Senate deliberated about the building of the nation’s first transcontinental railroad. This key issue would occupy the minds of legislators and the American public for close to two decades in the mid-19th century.

Recent research has revealed that Brumidi reflected this pressing national concern when he created the eight landscape medallions in the Senate wing. The scenes Brumidi depicted are some of the very pictures of the American West recorded during the 1853–54 federal expeditions to survey routes for a transcontinental railroad.¹



Architect of the Capitol

Architect of the Capitol

Top: *Mount Baker & Cascade Range*, lithograph from a sketch by John Mix Stanley, *Pacific Railroad Report*, Volume 12.

Bottom: Landscape medallion, Brumidi Corridors.

Top: *Cape Horn–Columbia River*, lithograph from a sketch by John Mix Stanley, *Pacific Railroad Report*, Volume 12.

Bottom: Landscape medallion, Brumidi Corridors.

Brumidi’s landscapes, which closely resemble the *Pacific Railroad Report* illustrations, were evidently inspired by this mid-19th century publication.

The survey's official report, authorized by Congress, was published between 1855 and 1861 as a 12-volume set with a name as ambitious as the rail project itself: *Reports of Explorations and Surveys, to Ascertain the Most Practicable and Economical Route for a Railroad from the Mississippi River to the Pacific Ocean, Made under the Direction of the Secretary of War in 1853–4*. The *Pacific Railroad Report* is considered the high-water mark in mapping and documenting trans-Mississippi America before the Civil War and is a monumental record of the resources, scenery, and character of the American West.

The *Pacific Railroad Report* was generously illustrated. To help inform the decisions of lawmakers in Congress regarding the “most practicable” route for the future railroad, artists accompanied the survey expeditions and depicted the terrain of potential rail routes. Brumidi's eight

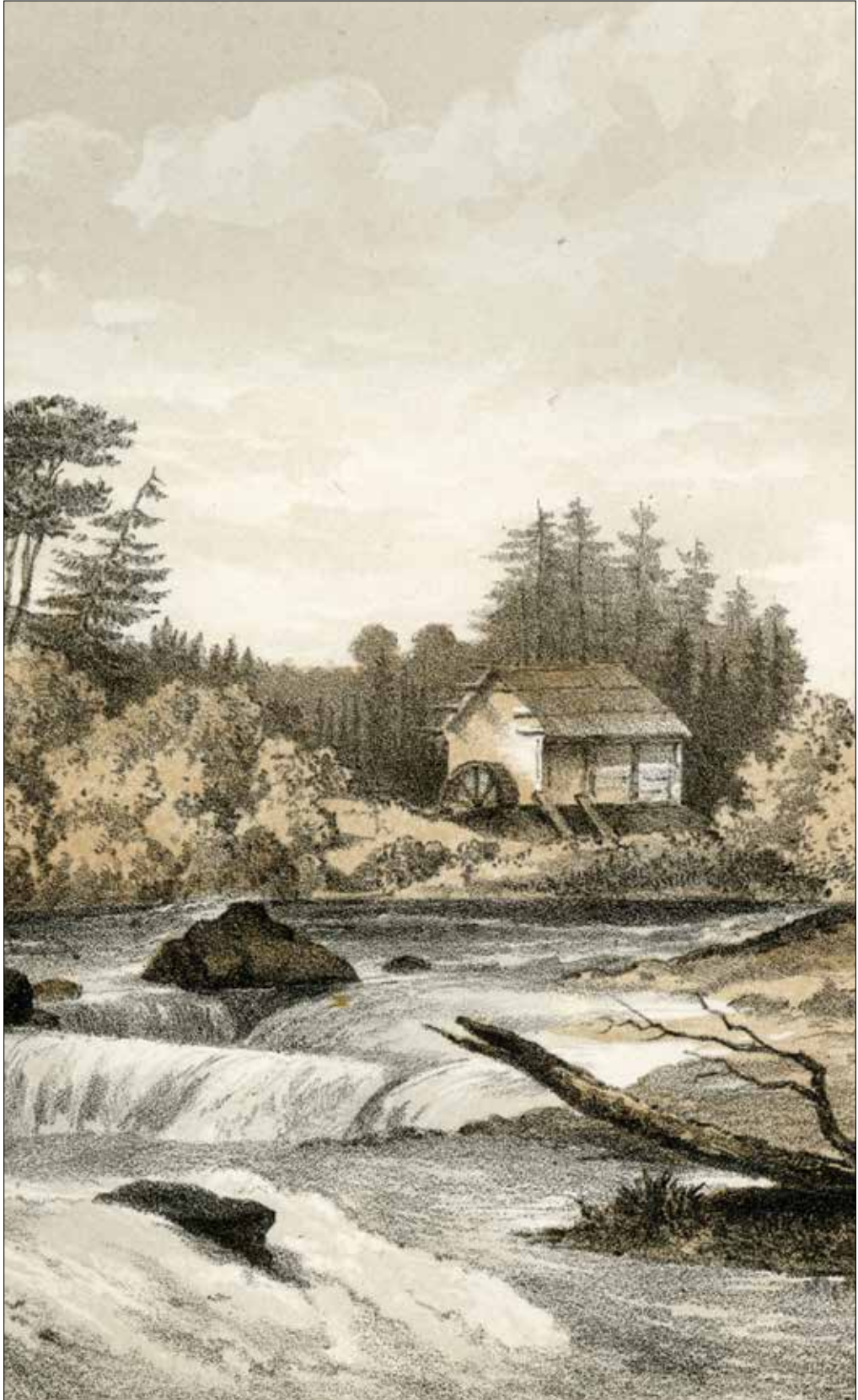
The medallions can now be identified as depicting specific geographic locations and can be understood in the context of the vital exploration and survey of the West for the proposed transcontinental railroad.

oval landscapes in the Capitol appear to be directly modeled on the *Pacific Railroad Report's* illustrations. Brumidi slightly altered certain details, perhaps to accommodate differences in format (rectangular in the source material versus oval in the medallion murals) or to visually balance the compositions of the eight individual landscapes, which are set in pairs on opposing walls. Despite minor differences between the illustrations and medallions, Brumidi's landscapes clearly take inspiration from this important mid-19th-century publication. The medallions can now be identified as depicting specific geographic locations and can be understood in the context of the vital exploration and survey of the West for the proposed transcontinental railroad.

Landscape medallion panel, Brumidi Corridors.

Brumidi's landscape paintings feature prominently in the wall murals that he designed around 1861.





Hudson Bay Mill (detail), lithograph from a sketch by John Mix Stanley, *Pacific Railroad Report*, Volume 12.

As early as the 1820s, the Hudson's Bay Company operated saw and grist mills to serve nearby Fort Colville in what is now Washington State. The Pacific railroad surveyors documented the grist mill and purchased flour as they passed through the territory in 1853.



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Landscape medallion (detail), Brumidi Corridors.

Brumidi based his landscape on the *Pacific Railroad Report* lithograph, *opposite page*. He copied specific details, such as the two loose planks near the mill, although he reversed the position of the fallen branch in the foreground.



The saga of the transcontinental railroad, including the historic 1853–54 survey, lends a provocative undercurrent to the seemingly gentle rivers in Brumidi’s paintings. During the early 19th century, transportation in America was slow, difficult, unreliable, and often dangerous. Modes of transportation evolved from rivers and canals to roads, turnpikes, and railroads. As “railroad fever” spread through the East and Midwest, Congress quickly recognized the need to unite the nation’s two coastlines with a railroad. From the early 1840s until passage of the Pacific Railway Act of 1862, Congress grappled with how to survey, fund, and build the railroad. It was indeed a project of daunting magnitude—an engineering endeavor that needed to overcome the vast plains, trackless deserts, and formidable mountain ranges that spanned two-thirds of the continent. Building the transcontinental railroad would be one of the greatest technological feats of the century, and construction of the railroad was estimated in 1859 to cost \$100 million, a sum calculated at “one third of the entire surplus products of the United States.”² Congress would also have to determine the constitutionality of the federal government’s involvement in building the railroad and to define the extent and character of the aid Congress could rightfully extend to the proposed work.

With the end of the Mexican-American War and the discovery of gold in California in 1848, western settlement, travel, and trade, as well as defense of the nation’s two coastlines, became increasingly vital concerns for legislators. Support for a transcontinental railroad ran strong, but the issue of which route the railroad should follow and the resulting competition of political interests led to stalemate. The difficult issue of states and slavery further complicated the debate, and in the volatile political environment of the 1850s, neither the anti-slavery North nor the pro-slavery South was willing to accept a compromise rail route. Northerners suggested a route along the 47th and 49th parallels. Senator Thomas Hart Benton of Missouri advocated a central route

between the 37th and 39th parallels. Secretary of War Jefferson Davis backed a more southern route. In March of 1853, with the contentious political dust swirling, the Thirty-second Congress approved the provisions of the Army Appropriation Act and directed Secretary Davis to dispatch survey teams to explore four possible east-to-west rail routes to the Pacific Ocean. Each route roughly followed specific latitudes. Two months after Congress approved the measure, the railroad survey expeditions were underway.

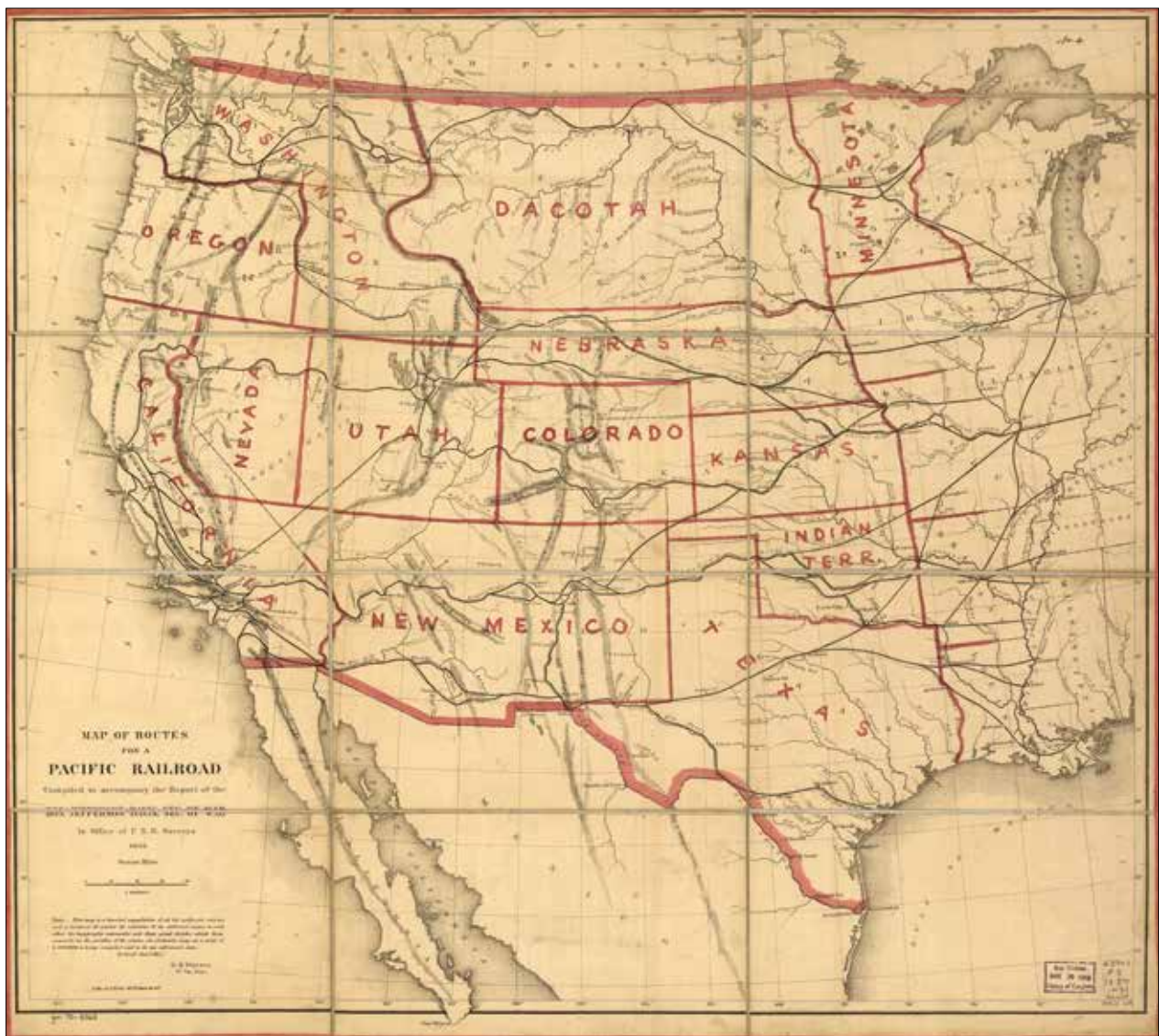
Starting in 1855, the reports generated by the survey expeditions began to roll off the press, leather bound for Congress. Speaking on the Senate floor in 1859, Senator James Harlan of Iowa, who lent his voice to pass the railroad bills, reminded his colleagues of their duty to study the publication and reach “an enlightened decision”:

I find that Congress passed a law, approved March 3, 1853, appropriating \$150,000, and May 31, 1854, appropriating \$40,000 more, and August 5, 1854, \$150,000 in addition, to be expended, under the direction of the Secretary of War, in an exploration and survey of all the routes then proposed. In all, \$340,000 have been withdrawn from the Treasury of the United States, by Congress, for the purpose of securing the requisite information. These laws have been faithfully executed. The corps of engineers, appointed on the various routes, have laboriously performed their duties. They have made their reports to their superior, the Secretary of War, and they have been ordered to be printed, and eight large quarto volumes have been laid on the desks of Senators.³

Because of the national and political significance of the proposed railroad, the *Pacific Railroad Report* generated a great deal of interest at the time it was published. Print runs for the dozen volumes ranged from 21,000 to 53,000, and the publication was discussed in newspapers and reviewed in contemporary periodicals. The cost of the report’s production reflects its importance.

In a period of 5 years, the federal government spent nearly \$1.3 million to produce the 12 volumes. Brumidi was certainly sensitive to the *Pacific Railroad Report's* salience to his congressional patrons, but the publication also offered the artist unique views of the landscapes, flora, and fauna of the West before photography made such imagery widely available. Prior to painting the landscape medallions, Brumidi used volume 10 of the *Pacific Railroad Report*, issued in 1859, to help him depict birds in the Brumidi Corridors that were native to the American West.

The specific material that Brumidi selected from the *Pacific Railroad Report* for his painted landscapes is worth noting. The artists on the railroad survey illustrated mountains, passes, and other distinctive terrain that would challenge engineers and require exceptional outlays of funds from backers of the railroad construction. The artists also carefully documented rivers, for those were the convenient and economical routes along which railroads were frequently built.⁴ Brumidi eschewed the dramatic scenes of canyons, waterfalls,



Map of Routes for a Pacific Railroad, by G.K. Warren, *Pacific Railroad Report*, Volume 11, lithograph, 1855.

and herds of buffalo stretching across the horizon—illustrations that offered copious material had Brumidi wished to portray the grand terrain of the American West. Instead, he favored tranquil river scenes. Seven out of the eight landscapes in Brumidi’s medallions illustrate free-flowing rivers with distant mountains punctuating

the backgrounds. Today, the river scenes in the Senate look picturesque; in Brumidi’s time, rivers provided crucial passageways through difficult lands and supplied water needed for crew, passengers, live cargo, and steam engines.

Interestingly, Brumidi did not give equal treatment in his murals to the four proposed east-to-west routes

Coeur d’Alene Mission, St. Ignatius River, lithograph from a sketch by John Mix Stanley, Pacific Railroad Report, Volume 12.

Catholic missionaries and members of the Coeur d’Alene tribe built the Coeur d’Alene Mission church between 1850 and 1853. It is the oldest standing building in Idaho.



Landscape medallion, Brumidi Corridors.

The composition and details in Brumidi’s landscape show the direct influence of the *Pacific Railroad Report* lithograph.

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that were detailed in the *Pacific Railroad Report*. Three-fourths of Brumidi's medallions depict landscapes from the northern survey, bracketed by the 47th and 49th parallels. During his 25-year career at the Capitol, Brumidi shied away from politics or controversy (perhaps a result of his political imprisonment in Italy from 1851 to 1852), so it is unlikely that this weighting towards one particular route was an overt political statement. An explanation may, in part, be as simple as convenience: the volume that Brumidi used for the majority

Tragically, three separate fires would destroy Stanley's life work and deny him a place as a nationally recognized artist by future generations.

of his landscapes was the most generously illustrated of the set, and it offered Brumidi many handsome illustrations from which to choose. Volume 12 of the *Pacific Railroad Report* included 70 landscape plates and was published in 1860. It was shortly thereafter, in 1861, that Brumidi and two assistant artists were hired to complete the area with the landscape medallions.

The influential volume 12 was largely illustrated by the expedition artist John Mix Stanley. Stanley's illustrations inspired six of Brumidi's eight medallions. Brumidi also adapted the work of artists Richard H. Kern from volume 2 and Baron F.W. von Egloffstein from volume 11. These artists, who accompanied the Pacific railroad expeditions, recorded pencil sketches while in the field. They then rendered the sketches into watercolors, ultimately printed as color lithographs, or a few as steel engravings, when the final report was prepared. Detailed narrative accounts of the expeditions frequently accompanied the illustrations. The singular experiences of these expedition artists, whose work Brumidi preserved for posterity in the Senate's murals, hint at the complex flavor of the American frontier in the early 1850s.

The expedition artist John Mix Stanley was an established figure in Washington, D.C., art circles in the mid-1850s. Tragically, three separate fires would destroy Stanley's life work and deny him a place as a nationally recognized artist by future generations. Even before Brumidi began work in the corridors, Montgomery C. Meigs was aware of Stanley. Meigs' journal, a valuable source of information about the commissioning of art for the Capitol extension, briefly mentions that, on October 22, 1856, a mutual acquaintance recommended that Stanley paint an "Indian scene" for a committee room in the Capitol.⁵



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Top: Bois de Sioux River, lithograph from a sketch by John Mix Stanley, Pacific Railroad Report, Volume 12.

Bottom: Landscape medallion, Brumidi Corridors.

According to the narrative account, the expedition party sat down at 11 p.m. on June 28, 1853, to a supper of coffee, ducks, and several catfish weighing 12 to 20 pounds each.



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Lieut. Grover's Despatch—Return of Governor Stevens to Fort Benton, lithograph from a sketch by John Mix Stanley, *Pacific Railroad Report*, Volume 12.

This scene depicts a small exploratory party that included Stevens, Stanley (seated and sketching), an Indian chief escort, and an interpreter. The illustration provides a glimpse of the daily experience of the expedition parties.

Stanley's body of work documented the culture and landscapes of the American frontier. The artist's 12-year journey through the West began in 1839, prior to extensive settlement of the land. Stanley joined various expeditions and captured the West with his portraits of Native Americans and landscapes. Stanley's intimate knowledge and personal experience of the American frontier were unrivalled. Only a handful of his paintings survive today, but Stanley was prolific, and his work was widely acclaimed in his time.

In 1852, Stanley displayed 150 paintings at the Smithsonian Institution and tried to interest members of Congress in purchasing the collection as the foundation of a national gallery. The Senate Committee on

Indian Affairs recommended the collection's purchase for \$19,200, and the Senate debated the acquisition of Stanley's paintings. Despite the support of Senator John Weller of California and Senator Isaac Walker of Wisconsin, the purchase was defeated when it came to a vote in March 1853.⁶ The collection remained at the Smithsonian and grew to over 200 of Stanley's paintings, before a fire at the Smithsonian in 1865 destroyed the collection. A second fire at P.T. Barnum's American Museum consumed additional paintings. After Stanley's death, a fire at his studio destroyed field sketches and later work—in all, an irreparable cultural loss to the nation.

Thankfully, a sampling of Stanley's documentation of the frontier West can still be found in the *Pacific*



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Herd of Bison, near Lake Jessie, lithograph from a sketch by John Mix Stanley, *Pacific Railroad Report*, Volume 12.

Expedition artists witnessed exceptional scenes from the frontier. According to the report's account, buffalo were hunted twice a year to procure dried meat, tongues, skins, and "pemmican," a mixture of dried buffalo meat, fat, and berries developed by Native Americans that proved popular with westward explorers and expansionists.

Railroad Report. Joining the railroad survey at its onset in 1853, Stanley accompanied Isaac Stevens, first governor of Washington Territory, on the northern route and was the highest paid member of Stevens' expedition.⁷ In volume 12, Stevens chronicled the arduous and fascinating experiences of his expedition party—from daily tasks and hardships to exceptional encounters with nature and interactions with Native Americans. On July 10, 1853, Stanley and Stevens witnessed the vast herds of buffalo populating the western plains prior to the railroad. Stanley sketched the scene, and Stevens recorded: "About five miles from camp we ascended to the top of a high hill, and for a great distance ahead every square mile seemed to have a herd

of buffalo upon it. . . . I had heard of the myriads of these animals inhabiting these plains, but I could not realize the truth of these accounts till to-day, when they surpassed anything I could have imagined from the accounts which I had received. The reader will form a better idea of this scene from the accompanying sketch, taken by Mr. Stanley on the ground, than from any description."⁸ A reporter who interviewed Stanley would later add emphasis, "The artist in sketching this scene, stood on an elevation in advance of the foreground, whence, with a spy-glass, he could see fifteen miles in any direction, and *yet* he saw not the limit of the herd."⁹ This sketch is one of the few extant scenes of its kind recorded in frontier times.¹⁰

Life as an expedition artist had perils to accompany its thrills. One of Brumidi's landscape medallion paintings serves as a reminder of the danger these expedition artists faced in the line of duty. Its corresponding lithograph, *Sangre de Cristo Pass*, was based on a scene completed by Stanley after the untimely death of the original artist, Richard H. Kern. Kern was one of three brothers with artistic skills who served on expeditions. Both Kern and a brother were killed by Native American Indians in separate incidents.

On October 25, 1853, Kern and 10 other men left their main party and escorted Captain John W. Gunnison, leader of the railroad's southern expedition along

the 38th and 39th parallels, to survey Sevier Lake in Utah. Ute Indians ambushed the group. Gunnison was pierced with 15 arrows; Kern and 2 other men in the party were killed as well. Measures were taken to recover the instruments, field notes, and Kern's sketch book taken by the Indians. Fortunately, "all the notes, most of the instruments, and several of the arms lost" were reclaimed.¹¹ The remains of the slain were located and given "the solemn rite of burial."¹² It was Kern's field sketches that Stanley later used to prepare some of the lithograph scenes found in volume 2.

Baron F.W. von Egloffstein, the third artist whose survey illustrations are represented in Brumidi's landscape



U.S. Senate Curator's Office



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Sangre de Cristo Pass, lithograph from a sketch by John Mix Stanley and Richard H. Kern, *Pacific Railroad Report*, Volume 2, top; and Brumidi's landscape, bottom, were based on a scene sketched in the field by Kern, who was killed by Ute Indians during the expedition.

Franklin Valley, an engraving from a sketch by F.W. Egloffstein, *Pacific Railroad Report*, Volume 11, top, served as the model for Brumidi's medallion, bottom. Brumidi did not include figures when he translated the lithographs into medallion paintings.



medallions, was a Prussian-born topographical engineer. Egloffstein had survived Colonel John C. Frémont's ill-fated expedition through the Rocky Mountains in 1853–54. (Frémont's sponsor was his father-in-law, Senator Thomas Hart Benton, who was determined to prove that the railroad should run through the central route.)

The connection between the Senate's murals and the federally sponsored Pacific Railroad Report now brings a rich and colorful tone to Brumidi's landscapes.

After serving as Frémont's artist under challenging conditions, Egloffstein arrived "half-dead" in Salt Lake City. Undeterred, he joined the Pacific railroad expeditions as a replacement for the slain Kern. Brumidi paired one of Egloffstein's landscapes from volume 11 with Kern's landscape on one of the Senate reception area's walls.

The connection between the Senate's murals and the federally sponsored *Pacific Railroad Report* now brings a rich and colorful tone to Brumidi's landscapes. How many years, however, had the landscapes languished, their identity and historical context forgotten? Even as Brumidi's paints were drying on the walls—on murals that celebrated the beauty and grace of America's scenery and anticipated the future railroad—the nation was forced to turn its attention to the Civil War. In 1861, following secession and withdrawal of the southern bloc (and with a southern rail route no longer an option), Congress speedily approved a route that was advantageous to northern interests.

Brumidi had finished his landscape medallions in the Brumidi Corridors when Congress finally passed legislation for the railroad in June 1862. President Lincoln signed the Pacific Railway Act that July, but when he did, the route for the proposed transcontinental railroad did not correspond with any of the "practicable routes" whose illustrations appear in the Brumidi Corridors. While the *Pacific Railroad Report*



U.S. Senate Collection

"Convalescent Soldiers Passing through Washington to Join Their Regiments" (detail), *Harper's Weekly*, engraving, November 15, 1862.

The advent of the Civil War influenced Congress' decision about the route for the transcontinental railroad. The proposed southern routes were eliminated from consideration.

helped identify geographical passages through which future railroads would one day be constructed, the report had failed to provide a "conclusive solution" to Congress for the first transcontinental railroad.¹³ So much had changed for the nation since Congress had initially dispatched the survey teams nine years earlier.



The *Pacific Railroad Report* quickly fell into obscurity, rendered obsolete by newer topographical engineering studies and by advancing technologies. Photography in the 1860s brought a new and more accurate way than an artist's rendering to document the West and provide imagery of distant lands. These lands, in fact, became much more accessible in 1869, when the nation's first transcontinental railroad was completed, finally linking the East and West. The identity of the landscapes and the meaning behind Brumidi's medallions faded with their source of inspiration, the *Pacific Railroad Report*.

When Brumidi passed away in 1880, he left a number of paintings and oil studies to his son Laurence. One of these paintings was an oval landscape of a mountain scene, possibly a preliminary study for a medallion in the Brumidi Corridors.¹⁴ The painting's whereabouts are unknown today. What we do now know is that the eight gentle landscapes Brumidi included in the Senate's first floor murals capture a slice of the era in which they were painted. The once-enigmatic landscapes thus take their place with the other symbolic and thematically relevant art in the Capitol and help commemorate the people, places, and innovations that so greatly shaped the nation.

Crossing the Bitter Root [sic], lithograph from a sketch by John Mix Stanley, *Pacific Railroad Report*, Volume 12.



Landscape medallion, Brumidi Corridors.

The inclusion of the footbridge in the medallion seems to be a case of artistic license. According to the narrative account, the expedition party encountered Nez Perce Indians riding "splendid" horses to a hunt. Fallen timber on land made the journey "tedious." The party crossed the river at 8 a.m. on October 9, 1853, and made no mention of a bridge.



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Steam locomotive, detail from *Liberty, Peace, Plenty, War*, fresco, 1869.

Locomotives in Brumidi's Frescoes

The development of the steam locomotive in the 19th century revolutionized the American way of life, and nothing embodied technological progress in the eye of the nation as powerfully as the “Iron Horse.” Rail lines covered the East and Midwest by the first half of the century, and in 1869, the first transcontinental railroad—a true engineering marvel—united America’s coasts.

Brumidi’s frescoes in the Capitol frequently reference technology. The billowing plumes of white vapor or dark smoke that issue from his locomotives and ships announce the power of their steam-driven engines. Of the handful of locomotives in Brumidi’s allegorical frescoes, the Senate Reception Room’s *Liberty, Peace, Plenty, War* provides the most recognizable example. Painted in 1869 from a sketch Brumidi had created nearly 10 years earlier, the locomotive is flanked by the caduceus of commerce, bears the number “31,” and is crowned by a wood-burning smokestack. The wheel arrangement identifies it as a 4-4-0, a model widely known as the “American Standard,” with its bright colors, highly decorative brass work, hand-built wooden cabs, and pilot, or “cowcatcher.”

The 4-4-0 locomotive’s popularity extended from the 1840s to the late 19th century. This model was used locally on the Baltimore and Ohio’s Washington Branch. Two celebrated 4-4-0s included the Central Pacific Railroad’s wood-burning Jupiter and the Union Pacific’s coal-burning No. 119. The two trains met at Promontory Summit in the Utah territory on May 10, 1869, for the Golden Spike ceremony commemorating completion of the first transcontinental railroad.