
Pamela Scott, an authority on the architecture and planning of Washington, D.C., provides a scholarly and readable history of the Treasury’s buildings, focusing principally on the great structure built between 1836 and 1871. It was functionally and symbolically important. The interior was a physical expression of contemporary clerical and bureaucratic process while the exterior was an imposing expression of solidity. Scott’s work is valuable for its analysis of the designs of architect Robert Mills and his successors, Thomas U. Walter, Ammi B. Young, Isaiah Rogers, and Alfred B. Mullett. Examining architectural practice in the developing United States and the pragmatic issues that required solutions, Scott is particularly good at relating the practicalities of construction to the building’s formidable symbology. Scott’s text focuses on the time span of principal building but extends to describe the development of the sculptural program in the first half of the twentieth century.

Chapter subheads bring focus to the analysis of siting and design. This allows the author to detail contention and compromise without impeding narrative flow. Use of contemporary correspondence brings immediacy to the chronological treatment. Key plans are reproduced in generous size. Illustrations are captioned in a way that moves the narrative forward, but the documents themselves are identified only casually, making it difficult or impossible to know what, in fact, has been reproduced (though the illustration credits link the documents with their repositories). For example, the Philadelphia view of Congress Hall and New Theatre is reproduced (Figure 1-6) with a caption oriented entirely toward the argument in the text. We may know, but are not informed, that the reproduction is derived from the work published in 1800 by W. Birch & Son. Graphic documentation is important to Fortress of Finance and could have been better identified without encumbering the book’s presentation. The inclusion of such information, as in the author’s own Temple of Liberty: Building the Capitol for a New Nation (New York, Oxford University Press, 1995), helps researchers locate material.

The book was commissioned by the Treasury Historical Association, whose purpose is to preserve the institutional and architectural history of the Department of the Treasury and its collection and to support public outreach. Fortress of Finance advances these objectives.

This is the subject’s first book-length treatment and fulfills the promise suggested by the informative but necessarily brief entry published in Scott and Antoinette J. Lee, Buildings of the District of Columbia (New York, Oxford University Press, 1993). Fortress of Finance is recommended for purchase by libraries wishing to offer a reliable and accessible history of one of our government’s early great buildings.

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