

Interview with George M. White
Interviewer, Ron Sarasin
September 8, 2008

Ron Sarasin: Welcome to the second interview of the U.S. Capitol Historical Society's new series, "Uncle Sam's Architects," focusing on the history of the Architects of the Capitol.

I am Ron Sarasin, president of the Society, and I am pleased to introduce our second guest in the series, the ninth Architect of the Capitol, George M. White.

George M. White graduated from the Massachusetts Institute of Technology with undergraduate and master's degrees in electrical engineering. He received an MBA from Harvard and a law degree from Case Western Reserve University. He's a registered architect and engineer. He's a fellow and former vice-president of the American Institute of Architects. President Richard Nixon appointed him Architect of the Capitol and he assumed that office in January 1971. As Architect of the Capitol from 1971 through 1995, White created the master plan for the future development of the Capitol complex. He oversaw construction of the Library of Congress, James Madison Memorial Building, the Hart Senate Office Building, the Thurgood Marshall Federal Judiciary Building and the Capitol terrace infill areas. His accomplishments included the restoration of the old Supreme Court and old Senate Chambers, the partial restoration of National Statuary Hall, the restoration of the Capitol's West-Central Front, and the interior restoration and renovation of the Library of Congress Thomas Jefferson and John Adams buildings. His conservation efforts included the rotunda canopy and frieze and the Statue of Freedom. In the Congressional office buildings he improved electrical, electronic, fire protection and transportation systems. Other work included the expansion of the Capitol power plant and planning and design for the Capitol garden and the Capitol Visitor's Center.

George White, it is a pleasure to be here and to have an opportunity to join you in your home as we talk about your experience as Architect of the Capitol.

George White: Happy to have you here, Ron.

Ron Sarasin: Let's begin by talking about your background before you became the Architect of the Capitol. Your father was an architect,

but I understand he advised you *not* to become an architect and instead, you decided to study engineering.

George White: That's right. My father had gone through the Depression, struggling as an architect. There was very little construction going on during that period and therefore, very little design work and very little architecture. He had struggled so much that he thought it was too big of a risk to go into that as a permanent profession. And I was always technically oriented anyway and so he advised that I study engineering, which I did. And I graduated, as you said, from MIT. I was in the class of '41, but I got my master's and bachelor's together in 1942. The war was on, of course, so I was involved with the World War, still with the General Electric Company, and did a lot of work on radar systems and that sort of thing. Then, when the war was over in 1945, I decided I would go to the Harvard Business School. I was always a good student and enjoyed studying anyway. So that's what I did, I was in the class of June—I mean of, yes, June of 1948 from the Harvard Business School. That's when I went to work in my father's office and while I was working in my father's office, the profession of architecture *and* engineering was struggling at that period. There were a lot of legal ramifications, professional liability, and so on. And I didn't intend to graduate from law school, I just thought I'd go for a semester and learn the language and become familiar with it and I did that, but I became fascinated with the law. It was like a good book, I couldn't put it down. And so I finished law school and passed the Bar, but I never practiced law as such.

Ron Sarasin: In 1970 the position of Architect of the Capitol became open following the death of George Stuart. Tell us how you became the next Architect of the Capitol. I believe the American Institute of Architects and Daniel Patrick Moynihan and President Nixon were all involved in that decision.

George White: That's right. Well, as I said earlier, I had gone to law school and I had written a paper in law school. It was in the Law Review because I was a good student and good students certainly get on the Law Review, which is a written document that is published by our law school. I had written a paper on architects and engineers, third party liability for negligence. Continental Casualty was a big

insurer of architects and engineers, picked up that article, they printed about thirty-thousand copies, as I recall, and spread it around all over the country, which got my name in front of a lot of architects. I was invited to speak in front of state architectural societies and local architectural groups, all over the country. So I became known in the profession as a result of my legal knowledge, rather than my abilities as an architect. That's how it developed.

Ron Sarasin: And you ended up on the board of the National Institute of Architects?

George White: Yes, I was on the board of the National Institute of Architects, as a result, continued to expand my knowledge of construction and the law. So I became well known. When I had membership on the board, I seemed to persuade other people that I should do something more. I was asked, as I said, to---I had an unopposed nomination to become the president of the American Institute of Architects. Well, that's a very prestigious thing and still is. That's what brought me in.

Ron Sarasin: Now at that time you had a choice to make, of whether to continue on in that progression to become the President of the American Institute of Architects or take the position of Architect of the Capitol. What made you choose Architect of the Capitol?

George White: That's right. Well a good friend of mine, in Cleveland, by the name of Ted Kilroy, discussed the situation with me at my request. And he said, "George, tell me the names of the last five presidents of the American Institute of Architects." Even though I was heavily involved, I couldn't name all five. He said, "That's your answer." I took his advice and accepted the nomination for Architect of the Capitol.

Ron Sarasin: When you became the Architect, obviously many challenges were going to be ahead of you. In fact, shortly after you took office in January 1971, a bomb exploded in a restroom on the Senate side of the Capitol and you found yourself called to testify before the Senate Rules Committee. How did that go?

George White: Well I was a little concerned. I had never testified before anybody and here I was, in the nation's Capitol, the Capitol of the United States, testifying before a congressional committee and it was a little bit frightening. I tried to do my homework and tried think of whatever they might ask me. In that regard, let me say that I was very fortunate that the staff of the Office of the Architect was an excellent group of people, who had been operating the office, really, for a long time because my predecessor, as you said, George Stuart, had become ill and he wasn't there a lot. His staff was in effect, Architect of the Capitol, so I had good staff and they were well versed in the Congress and how you proceed. So I had good advice and council which helped in my testimony. It all worked out although I was very cautious. And I must say that the chairman of the committee at the time, the senator, who was chairman of the committee, was very cordial, pleasant and helpful—didn't try to badger me or frighten me, tried to be helpful so that I wouldn't feel uncomfortable.

Ron Sarasin: You mentioned George Stewart. Stewart himself was not a professional architect. He had been an engineer apparently president of a construction firm. He had actually been a member of Congress. Is it important that the Architect of the Capitol be a professional architect?

George White: It is now. But it needs to be the kind of an architect that is not desirous in winning design medals because it is not a place where you can be creative. You have to know architecture and all that is involved in that which it is much more than just what it looks like. The distinguishing feature, of course, of an architect and the architectural profession is to bring beauty into man's built environment. While that is the distinguishing feature most people think of an architect as some wild eyed radical that tries to change everything. That's not what it is all about. It's a highly technical need that in general is something that many architectural students wouldn't take to. So in that way, in my case I would never have been known as a design architect but as a technical architect. And that is how it developed.

Ron Sarasin: I understand that at one time you received a letter from somebody saying "Why in the world does the building need an architect, it has already been designed."

George White: Yes, that was when I was first appointed. Somebody wrote a letter saying they always thought the government was wasteful and here was proof positive, they had appointed an architect for a building that had been completed for 200 years. Of course I responded to it and explained what the architect's office does, which is far beyond just adding beauty.

Ron Sarasin: As we pointed out in the introduction, you are responsible as the Architect of the Capitol for the maintenance and preservation of the building but it is not just that building. It is the entire complex which includes the Library of Congress, the power plant, the Supreme Court, the other buildings of the Library of Congress, the Botanical Gardens. That is an incredible amount of responsibility. How did you go about administering your office with all of that responsibility on your shoulders?

George White: Well, I had a lot of help. Of course, the people that were there were very competent. Those that I hired as time went on, I tried to find the best that I could. I tried to find people who knew more than I did about anything. And fortunately that worked out well. It was a major management problem and that is why some have said you don't need an architect you need a manager. Well you need both. You need an architect because we are dealing with architecture. And we are dealing with the restoration of buildings that represent through architecture the symbolism of the United States. It needs to be an architect but it needs to be a manager type architect. I didn't realize it at the time by my desire to go to the Harvard Business School was indicative of my own leaning in that direction. And that is what made it work. It is not only the scope of different things that the architect is responsible for but it is the size of the organization. At one point, I don't know what it is now because I have been gone for a number of years, at one point we had over 2,000 employees just in the architect's office. Most people think of an architect's office half a dozen or a dozen or maybe twenty-five or so people. I had that many people in the design aspect. The whole secret, if there is one, is to hire competent people to do the things that need to be done. I used to hire a lot of consultants. The Congress was very understanding of that and provided the funds

because without the funds you cannot do anything. In some ways I was lucky in that things worked out well. As a friend of mine used to say, you would rather be lucky than smart. I had a little of each I suppose.

Ron Sarasin: My predecessor, who was the founding president of the U.S. Capitol Historical Society, Fred Schwengel, often said that you had the most difficult job in the Congress because you had 535 bosses. Every member of the House and Senate felt that they had some interest in what you were doing so he felt that you had to be the best diplomat in town. Is this a process that you took to naturally or did you kind of learn as you went along?

George White: Well I think both. I had some natural capacity, I suppose you would call it, for dealing with people. But I learned as I went along. I tried my best to learn as I went along. The interesting thing is that I always tried to run the office on a high moral plain as well. All of that activity that you just described involved money being spent by the government for outside work and so on. There were hundreds of millions of dollars that passed through my hands over the years. It all was perfectly provided for and no criticisms were ever made and no one could touch me when it came to morality. I tried to conduct my office on that basis and I think that helped too. I was also apolitical. I was political in the sense of being sensitive to the political arena. But I was apolitical in the terms of my judgments. And I think that that helped as well.

Ron Sarasin: George, during your more than 20 years in office I am sure that you have had many memorable experiences and met many fascinating people. Share with us some of your memories. For example, Queen Elizabeth and the Magna Carta.

George White: Well that was an interesting experience. The British government had decided that they wanted to do something special for the bicentennial celebration that we were having. So they decided to take one of the two best copies that they had of the Magna Carta and put it on display in our Capitol in a presentation case that they had prepared specially for it and then leave a permanent copy of it here. When the Queen came over for the ceremonies to present it, I was asked to participate in greeting her; which I did. And she came back

in the evening for dinner and a reception which was in the British embassy. There was a rope barricade used as it usually for crowds to keep them back while she circulated around the edges from inside and smiled and shook people's hands as she went around the circle. I was standing with my wife and I had worked my way up to the edge where the rope was. And since she and I had met and talked about the presentation earlier in the day on the official visit I said to her, "Your Majesty, you may recall we talked about the presentation case earlier in the day and I would like to present my wife." And she greeted her and said, "By the way, what was that snake doing in the sculpture underneath the British Coat of Arms?" I said, "Well, that was representative of the Garden of Eden and that was the snake from the garden." "Oh" she said, "that explains it. I thought it wasn't very nice to have a snake under the British Coat of Arms." And she went on and moved along. In the background I saw President Ford, who was there for the same purpose of greeting her, talking to somebody. And I later on discovered that she had stopped and talked at some length and she didn't talk to anybody else. And so Ford said to his people, "What the hell is the queen of England doing talking to George White?" So that was an interesting experience from my standpoint.

Ron Sarasin: There have been a number of dignitaries who have entered the Capitol and you have had the opportunity to be with and greet. Like Nelson Mandela, and Vaclav Havel, and Gorbachev. Tell us about those experiences.

George White: Well those were fortuitous from my standpoint in that since I am an architectural appointee of the president I sort of represent the President and the Congress. I think that is the basis for my greeting him whenever he comes to the Capitol. That was going on long before I go there. So when these visiting dignitaries come to the Capitol, I am normally invited as part of the greeting and reception group. For example, when the President comes for the State of the Union address to the Congress, he is greeted and brought to a holding room before he comes out onto the House floor. Some of the leaders of Congress will meet him in the holding room. Well, I normally am one of the people like the Sergeant of Arms of the House will also be there and perhaps of the Senate. To meet him when he arrives and to bring him to a holding room where he will

meet the leaders of the Congress, so I am sort of a representative in that sense of the Executive branch in the Congress. I meet these people, just to say hello and get my photograph. I do not really have any discussions. So that is how that arises.

Ron Sarasin: Was there a question once about replacing the Architect and “Tip” O’Neill stepped in?

George White: Oh yes. When Jimmy Carter became the President ,word came to me from some architect friends that there was an architect in Atlanta, they didn’t tell me who, who wanted to be Architect of the Capitol and that he had made major efforts on the part of Jimmy Carter’s election and that they thought that he might get appointed by the President since it was the President’s prerogative to do so under the law at that time. I had two or three people tell me that so I decided that if there is that much smoke there might be some fire. So I went to “Tip” O’Neill and told him the story and he told said “don’t worry about it I’ll take care of it.” Which he did. I never heard any more about it. It was good to have friends on the Hill. In that regard, I can’t remember the occasion, I was a part of a Congressional delegation, and I guess it was part of the Magna Carta ceremonies. We went to the Capitol to be greeted by the President in connection with the presentation of the Magna Carta. The Congressional leadership was there and I was one of the people who were invited since I was going to be responsible for it. My wife and I stood in the line waiting to get in to the Capitol with a group of the leadership right behind “Tip” O’Neill. We had to sign a book as we went in. And I looked at the signature just before mine and instead of Thomas P. O’Neill he signed it “Tip and Milly O’Neill” and I thought that’s why he is such a well-liked person. I signed it formally but that was his prerogative to do as he pleased.

Ron Sarasin: In your role as Architect of the Capitol you have also had to deal with the artists who have made contributions to the Capitol over the years like Calder or Hancock. Tell us about that.

George White: Well, we had a competition for a piece of sculpture to go in the Heart Senate Office Building. I always made sure that there was never any favoritism involved as far as we could tell and as far as we could control it. So we had appointed a committee to judge the

submissions and we invited artists and well known sculptors to submit proposals. The one that was finally selected was Alexander Calder or Sandy Calder as people called him. And as a result of that I met with him in his studio. And on several occasions I made some comments and whether he accepted them or not I do not know but at least he listened. He died after the sculpture was accepted. So he was not there for the completion of it which put some more responsibility on me to make sure that it was properly done. That was one instance.

Walker Hancock was a different kind of a sculptor. Walker Hancock was a realistic sculptor. He did busts of living people or posthumous busts as well. I used to meet with him in his studio just outside of Boston. He was a wonderful person and a fine sculptor. There were a number of instances of that kind where I met with people of that caliber. And in connection with an earlier question about whether the Architect of the Capitol should be an architect; you cannot really make responsible judgments about architecture or about art if you have had no training or experience in that regard. So that is another reason why the Architect of the Capitol needs to be an architect.

Ron Sarasin: George let's talk about your memories of some of your major accomplishments which include construction of the James Madison Building of the Library of Congress, the Hart Senate Office Building, and the Thurgood Marshall Federal Judiciary Building. Let's talk about the Hart Building.

George White: Let's talk about the Hart Building because we did something unique that had not been done before. The Hart Building contains two story offices for the Senators as opposed to the original concept of the office buildings where a Senator got some rooms down a corridor on a double loaded corridor like an ordinary office building. And as they needed more space they got more rooms. Well, pretty soon you had ten or twelve rooms on a main corridor which didn't permit much flexibility in layout. Well we changed that in the Hart Building and designed two story offices with the second story being common to all so you could divide it up in a number of different ways. It was unique in that sense and it worked out very well. Everybody seemed pleased with it.

Ron Sarasin: George let's talk about the Thurgood Marshall Judiciary Building.

George White: Well, that was a unique building in the fact that it was located next to Union Station. It had a beautiful atrium which lent itself to the decoration in such a way as to alleviate the difficulty of a big room with nothing in it. It has a lot of planting in it. We spent a lot of time working that out. And that of course was for the Judiciary. And they had their own requirements separate from an ordinary office building. Meeting rooms and so on and conference rooms.

Ron Sarasin: In the Capitol itself there are only two museum rooms of the sort in the Capitol. The Old Senate Chamber and the Old Supreme Court Chamber. Rooms that have been restored to look as they did at an earlier time. Tell us about your restoration of those spaces.

George White: Well, that was very fascinating because it meant digging into the history architecturally of those rooms. We spent a lot of time and effort to reproduce those as they had been. Of course we had records in the office that enabled us to do that. I think everybody was pleased with the result in those cases. The idea of restoration is particularly interesting because it involves history. And architecture represents history particularly in the cases of anything like the United States Congress. The fact that it came out of the Judiciary, it gave authority for final judgment to the Chief Justice who heads the Judiciary. We always had a good relation with the Chief Justice. Warren Burger was the Chief Justice when I arrived. After my first two visits with him, on the second visit which he asked for, he was very interested in architecture and softening the lines of the building, he said, "I paid you what I considered to be a high compliment after our last meeting." I said, "What was that Mr. Chief Justice?" And he said, "I said to my secretary Mr. White speaks like a lawyer and I discovered that he is one." The point is that we developed a close relationship because of his interest in architecture. So as these new buildings, like the Thurgood Marshall Building, were developed we would clear things through the Chief Justice as well as the people who were actively going to be using the building. But he had the final authority in that regard. We had a competition for our design of the building among practicing architects of note. We generally tried not

to select anybody in advance so there was no favoritism involved. We had a committee that I had appointed to review the selections of the submissions so again we tried to be objective about it so that it wouldn't come out that some friend of mine got the architecture contract because they were friends rather than by merit.

Ron Sarasin: Let's shift gears a little bit and talk about the conservation of the Rotunda canopy and the restoration of the freeze and all the work done on the statue of freedom. What kind of challenges did the canopy offer?

George White: Well, we had to build a scaffolding to fill the whole rotunda in order to have a platform to work from to do that rotunda canopy and artists working there from scaffolding was a major challenge, but it all worked out well.

Ron Sarasin: And the Statue of Freedom, what kind of project was that?

George White: The Statue of Freedom was a unique project. The statue is composed of five pieces of cast bronze and the pieces are bolted together from the inside so you couldn't lift it up from the top you had to lift it from the bottom because those bolts were not strong enough to support the load. So that meant a lot of unique engineering. We brought it down from the top of the load to the east front of the capitol. We restored in public view. We built scaffolding around it so people could work on it but it was all open to the public. So people were interested in that and watched on a daily basis as it was being restored and when helicopter lifted it off to bring it down I said I had a airplane ticket to Mexico so that if anything happened, if they dropped it, I would be gone. That all worked out well. When we put it back up, we of course notified the public and a lot of members of congress or leadership were there to see it go back up and the helicopter was there and the cables were all attached and the president came to witness it too and he was shaking peoples hands as he always does and we delayed the liftoff time while he was moving through the crowd and Senator Mitchell [Senator George Mitchell], he was the majority leader of the Senate at the time said to me "what are you waiting for George? Its chilly and eager to get it started" I said "Oh I'm waiting for the President to finish shaking

hands.” He says “He’ll never finish, so lets do it” So I signal the people who are involved and away we went.

Ron Sarasin: The security of the Capitol complex is obviously a very important issue especially today. What are your thoughts on security based on your experience?

George White: Well, that’s an interesting question because when I was first appointed I didn’t know I was allowed in security, of course I was told that. and the Architect of the Capitol at that time was a member of the capitol police board which consisted of three individuals, the sergeant at arms of the Senate, sergeant at arms of the House and the Architect of the Capitol, so I became officially involved in those security decisions at that time. Of course we had, it was really a police force at that time, there were like guards, school guards or something of that nature, it was not a professional police force. I think we had half a dozen sworn police officers and the rest of them were students in some cases. Of course that’s all changed now and with those changes came the restrictions that come with security. People having to be examined for metal objects they are carrying under their coats and whatnot. That’s a common problem to our whole society how to maintain our freedoms in the midst of the need for security and protection; it’s a difficult problem that we face every day. You can’t get on an airplane and go someplace without somebody examining you and they make you take your shoes off and all the rest of those things. Which we accept, but there is a hesitancy about accepting it, and we have to deal with that as if you’re in charge of security. That’s all changed I’m talking now about the casualness we used to have. I came to Washington in high school. I had an uncle who lived here and I stayed with him for several weeks and wandered around in all the buildings I had no idea I ever have the responsibilities and connections that arose over the years. and I went everywhere I climbed to the top of the dome, it was all open to the public you could go where you wanted to and do what you wanted to. Well that’s never going to happen again we don’t live in that kind of world anymore so the question of security, which didn’t used to exist, is now a major consideration of the Architect of the Capitol. Nothing you can do about it at the moment and I don’t know that we ever will.

Ron Sarasin: As you know, Congress is searching for a new Architect of the Capitol. I don't know whether they've asked for your advice or not, if you were asked, what qualities do you think the next architect should have?

George White: Well, I have to base my answer on what I would do and I think its extremely important to run the office as a professional office. Somebody, some congressmen when the suggestion came that it not be an Architect of the Capitol he introduced some legislation that said the Architect of the Capitol shall be an architect or in the alternative the physician of the capitol shall not be a physician. And that's kind of an interesting way of looking at it. It's an architectural process, as I've said on another occasion. That doesn't mean it ha to be a Frank Lloyd Wright type architect. It has to be a manager architect because as you learned from some of our descriptions of responsibilities it's a management problem as much as anything else. And you need a good manager but the manager needs to be a management. With the thought in mind the architect brings beauty into man's built environment, we need all of that we can get. As I arrived earlier, the Chief Justice brought potted plants from home to soften the feeling instead of it being a harsh marble corridor by itself. So in my judgment the architect should be someone who has integrity and operates on a morality basis. it needs to be an office that operates at the highest quality of human relations. You mention earlier about the fact that the Architect has 535 bosses, meaning all the senators and members of the House, so he needs to be something of a diplomat and I guess that's true, so it needs to be someone that's not rigid and accepting in the case of morality. I think you need someone who is beyond reproach in connection with moral standards. There is hundreds of millions of dollars passed through the Office of the Architect and it needs to be known that he is untouchable, or she.

Ron Sarasin: You talked about your advice as to what kind of a candidate they should be looking for, once that candidate is chosen what advice do you have for that individual?

George White: The individual has to be sensitive to the unique arena to which he is operating. There isn't anything like it anywhere. You know from your own experience as a member, former member of

Congress, it's a unique institution. And in that regard those founders, as they've been called, of the country, people like Thomas Jefferson, James Madison, and George Washington, they were geniuses at putting together a system that had internal checks and balances so that nobody could take over, easily. There's people who try and still try, but somehow it seems to work. And so it's got to be someone who works with the system but doesn't take advantage of it in the sense of gaining power. The expression 'if you want to get along, go along', is a good one to follow up to a degree, but there's a point where that works to a disadvantage of the whole system. So the individual needs to be flexible and not rigid. And to be very knowledgeable and never thinking those at all, even those he's knowledgeable or she. You know, the individual needs to be sensitive to the role that is being filled in that office. As you go down the list of things that the responsibilities of the Architect include, is why I say he needs to be flexible, or she.

Ron Sarasin: You've had a magnificent career, a long, long career time as Architect of the Capitol, how would you like to be remembered?

George White: I think I'd like to be remembered as someone who brought integrity into the process and who made a contribution to our nation's history.

Ron Sarasin: Well, I don't think you have to worry about that, I think you've certainly accomplished all of those goals, thank you very much.