

FIFTY STATE CAPITOLS:  
THE ARCHITECTURE OF REPRESENTATIVE GOVERNMENT

Kit Salter

Here are five things I learned reading *Fifty State Capitols*: 1) The Palace of Governors on the Plaza of Santa Fe (New Mexico) and part of the state capitol grounds is the oldest public building in the United States, built in 1610; 2) The grand stairway in the Missouri State capitol is 30 feet wide and extends 65 feet from one side to the other and is among the widest stairways in the world; 3) The initial state capital of New Hampshire was named Penacook, then Rumford, then Concord (and it had been moved from Portsmouth after consideration of Salisbury and Hopkinton.) 4) The capital of Nebraska was removed from Omaha to be the newly settled and named Lincoln--and this new city was to house the state capitol, the penitentiary, and the university as well; and 5) The capitol in Des Moines, Iowa has, above its central rotunda, twelve gilded bronze statues representing History, Science, Law, Fame, Literature, Industry, Peace, Commerce, Agriculture, Victory, Truth, and Progress—and at the end of 15 years of construction a final accounting of the entire capitol the audit showed \$3.77 unaccounted for (that is three dollars and 77 cents!)

These are among the many facets of history, architecture, politics, geography and local place identity that serve as the building blocks of Dr. Jim Stemberge's *Fifty State Capitols: The Architecture of Representative Government* (2011). The book is designed around 50 two-page spreads, each on a state capitol illustrating the capitol building, some of the interior, shots of the grounds and the settings and several hundred words of prose. Not just are dates of founding and building included, but asides about the forces of politics and commerce in their efforts to secure a favored local for the site for the new (and—hopefully--final) capital as well as capitol.

In addition to the author's attention to art and painting and significant personnel involved in the creation of these dominant structures, the book is rich in additional historical tidbits. This gives the reader a better sense of the critical process of selecting a capital city, designing a capitol structure, and the securing of often necessary associated state functions (university, penitentiary) to help give the new capital and capitol permanency.

What author Stemberge has done—for he is a geographer—is take focus on a traditional day trip of American families. In such nostalgia, the parent or grandparent calls out “Hey, kids, get in the car. I want to show you the state capitol and if things go well, we may end up at an ice cream shop.” The author has made this into a three-year field assignment and through his travel, research, prose, and photography given two strong meanings to the phrase: Geography is concerned with state capitals. He has very deftly added the second spelling—capitol.

The book also is richly photographed. All of the work is done by Stemberge and it is clear than he gave considerable thought to time of day and even season in his traveling and photography. The shots on pages 83, 76, 56, 82, and 100 are worth the price of admission just in themselves. The book also enhances its value by concluding with 11 pages of comparisons between capitols and the presentation of an illustrated glossary.

This is a book that is beautiful enough to be a classic Coffee Table Book, but the content, spirit, and highly varied inclusions of place-specific features makes it a great read as well. This book ought to be in all schools, all offices of American politicians, and in public libraries in every state that has a state capitol!

www.FIFTYSTAECAPITOLS.COM

ISBN 13:978-0-9830292-5 and ISBN 10:0-989830292-0-5 v, 121 pp

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