

VERMONT STATE HOUSE

Introduction

Picturesquely set against wooded hills, the Vermont State House is one of the most elegant state houses in the nation.

It is one of the smallest state capital houses still in use as the capital, and Montpelier, population 8,000, is the smallest state capital in the country.

Its House and Senate chambers are also the oldest in the nation still in their original form.

The Vermont State House is one of the most accessible in the nation, with minimal security, helpful staff, frequent guided tours, an attractive cafeteria, and a well-stocked gift shop.

The Vermont State House's most recent claim to fame was the landmark legislation that allowed same-gender couples to form "civil unions," making Vermont the first state in the nation to do so.

To get to the Vermont State House, take Exit 8 off I-89 onto Route 2 East. At the second traffic light, turn left onto Bailey Avenue, and at the next light, turn right onto State Street. The state house is about 200 yards down State Street, on the left.

For almost 30 years, after the Republic of Vermont was founded in 1777, Vermont did not have a state house, or a state capital. Instead, the state's fledgling Legislature met in no less than 14 different towns.

Despite stiff competition from other, often, larger towns, Montpelier was chosen as the permanent seat of state government in 1805, largely because of its central location in the state. Other provisions included providing the land for the state house and ensuring the building was completed by September 1808. It would be the first of three state houses built on almost the same location.

Land for the state house was donated by Thomas Davis – son of Colonel Jacob Davis, the first permanent settler and founder of Montpelier – and the first building cost \$9,000.

The first state house – situated on the site of the current Vermont Supreme Court – was a three-story wooden building that looked like a traditional New England meeting house, although a belfry atop and recessed porches across the front made it a more fitting seat of government.

Inside, the seating was simple, consisting of straight-backed benches with wide shelves along the backs that served as desk space for legislators. It is said that the building became obsolete, in part, because legislators whittled away the benches and desk space with pocketknives, and needed to be replaced. Another, more important reason to rebuild was the building had become too small and inefficient for the growth in government business. It was subsequently demolished.

There was again competition from other towns to be the home of a new state house, but Montpelier again won out, in 1832. However, the citizens of Montpelier had to agree to match the state's \$15,000 contribution toward construction.

The second state house was designed by Ammi B. Young – who also designed the U.S. Treasury Building in Washington, D.C. – and built between 1833 and 1838. It had a Greek Revival design of a democratic temple, based on the Theseus in Athens. It was a classic design, shaped like a cross and surmounted by a low circular Roman dome. At the front of the building was a magnificent triangular-topped portico supported by six massive Doric pillars.

The building was constructed using Barre granite that took a team of horses and oxen 18 hours to make the 10-mile roundtrip to deliver a single load. The final cost of the building was \$132,000.

Just 19 years later, in January 1857, the state house was gutted by fire, caused by a wood-burning heating system. The entire interior and dome were destroyed, leaving only the magnificent portico and walls standing.

The third state house was built from 1857 to 1859 on the same site, and cost \$150,000. It incorporated the still-standing portico that bears scars of the fire to this day where the intense heat caused granite to flake off. A similar design by Thomas Siloway, an apprentice of Young, enlarged the east and west wings, and topped it with a tall dome in the Renaissance Revival style popular at the time.

The state house dome was originally sheathed in copper and painted red, and not gilded in 24-carat gold as it is today until 1907. It was topped by a statue of Ceres, the Goddess of Agriculture. Carved by renowned Vermont sculptor Larkin Mead, it was replaced, due to deterioration, by a replica carved by former Sergeant-at-Arms Dwight Dwinell in 1938. Efforts in recent years to paint and repair the statue led to the discovery of a small time capsule, hidden in the head of the statue, containing artifacts and newspaper accounts of the time, now on display in the state house.

Additions to the state house include an 1886 annex to the west to house the Vermont Supreme Court, expanded state library and Vermont Historical Society, a 1900 Speaker's annex and a 1987 cafeteria and offices, both to the rear.

Outside the front of the building are two Spanish naval guns, captured by Admiral George Dewey (who was born in a house across the street) in the Spanish-American War of 1898. (

Also outside the entrance to the state house is a copy of another Larkin Mead statue of Green Mountain Boys legendary hero Ethan Allen, again replaced in 1941 due to deterioration. At the west entrance to the state house is another statue of Vermont's first governor, Thomas Chittenden.

The interior of the state house by Joseph P. Richards is as spectacular as the exterior, and is one of the best preserved in the country after a \$5 million restoration in the 1990s.

The only surviving statue by Larkin Mead is a bust of Abraham Lincoln at the end of the Hall of Inscriptions, created as a model for Lincoln's tomb in Springfield, Illinois. Other artwork includes portraits of two naval heroes of the Spanish-American War, Admiral George Dewey and Charles Clark of Bradford; and Vermont's two presidents, Calvin Coolidge and Chester Arthur.

Also of note on the first floor is the tile work, white tiles from Danby and black tiles from Isle La Motte on Lake Champlain, some containing ancient fossils. Many of the rooms on the ground floor are committee rooms or offices.

You ascend to the second floor via one of two exotic spiral staircases, arriving in the Vestibule that serves both the House and Senate chambers. Also called the Hall of Flags for its large collection of 68 flags that have been carefully restored. The richly decorated carpet underfoot is a faithfully reproduction of the original.

The House of Representatives and the Senate chambers have both been restored to the 1859 appearance. The House ceiling has a large plaster lotus blossom from which hangs the original bronze and gilt chandelier. A portrait of George Washington hangs over the Speaker's chair, rescued from the fire of 1857, and above it, Vermont's coat of arms.

The Senate is an exquisitely detailed elliptically shaped room filled with Renaissance and Rococo Revival furnishings. Other outstanding features include the original gasolier that was restored and reinstalled in 1981.

The Governor's Office, used only for ceremonial events, has also been faithfully restored and includes the Constitution Chair, carved from the timbers of the frigate of the USS Constitution, that has been in use since 1858. Portraits of 19th century governors include works by famous Montpelier artist Thomas Waterman Wood, and by Benjamin Franklin Mason and J.Q.A. Ward.

The Cedar Creek Room has a spectacular 20-by-10-foot painting of the Battle of Cedar Creek. Painted by Julian Scott over a four-year period, it commemorates one of the finest moments in Vermont war history. The room also features restored stained glass skylights that used to illuminate the former state library here. Also here, you will see the contents of a time capsule recently found in the head of the dome statue during its restoration.

Much of the credit for the restoration of the state house goes to the Friends of the Statehouse who also run a small gift shop on the ground floor June through mid-October. Money raised from the gift shop goes towards ongoing restoration.

There is an excellent short book on the state house history that we recommend, titled "History Happens Here: The Story of Vermont's State Houses and Its Government," and available in the gift shop.

The state house is open year-round except holidays, Monday to Friday, 8 a.m. to 4 p.m. There are free guided tours every half-hour, July through mid-October, Monday to Friday, 10 a.m. to 3:30 p.m., and Saturdays, 11 a.m. to 2:30 p.m.

To arrange group or school tours, or more information about the state house, call the Sergeant-at-Arms at 802-828-2228.

