

FURNISHING PLAN  
FOR THE  
FIRST FLOOR OF CONGRESS HALL  
INDEPENDENCE NATIONAL HISTORICAL PARK

Supplement 2

Architectural Analysis  
of the  
Historic Philip Van Cortlandt Seating Plan

U.S. Department of the Interior  
National Park Service  
Harper's Ferry Center  
Library

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March 31, 1995

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## Acknowledgements

The restoration of Congress Hall, the earliest surviving home of the United States Congress, will probably never be complete. Devoted historical architects, historians and curators will undoubtedly continue to discover previously unknown or unrecognized sources of additional historical information that will refine or redefine the prevailing interpretation of the building. There is a perceptible tradition at Independence National Historical Park which encourages among its staff a profound curiosity about the resources under their care. Occasionally, enough significant new information is assembled to warrant a reinterpretation of a building's history or to change some aspect of its restoration.

Such has been the case with the interpretation of the House of Representatives Chamber in Congress Hall. The space was last restored in 1961 after extensive research produced a wealth of clues but no hard evidence describing the actual architectural shape of the House members' seating arrangement. Subsequent to that restoration, additional information has surfaced, most notably a drawing by Federal period Congressman Philip Van Cortlandt showing a seating plan in the House Chamber. An examination of this document in 1992 by Associate Curator Karie Diethorn resulted in an effort by herself and Museum Intern John Bacon to factor its features into the interpretation of the House Chamber. Their work in turn led to the analysis of the architectural aspects of the drawing contained in this report.

The following analysis of Van Cortlandt's drawing was assisted by virtually the entire staff of the Cultural Resources Management Division at Independence National Historical Park. Chief Historical Architect William D. Brookover provided critical support and encouragement. Historian Anna Coxé Toogood was always available with her deep knowledge of Philadelphia's history and its archival resources. Karie Diethorn, now Chief Curator, gave her continuous support and attention to the development of this report. Doris Fanelli, Chief of the Division Cultural Resources Management, provided support and resources to pursue the required research and to fully document the findings in this report.

In addition to the current staff of the park, many former staff members offered guidance and insight into the dynamic of the 1961 restoration project. Former INDE Historical Architect Penelope Hartshorne Batcheler, intimately involved in that previous restoration, provided inspiration as well as insight into interpreting the historical evidence.

This will not be the last report written about the House of Representatives Chamber in Congress Hall. Later researchers will locate historical evidence that will either refine, corroborate or refute the findings of this report. This writer has endeavored to construct this report in a clear and concise manner to aid those future researchers in their efforts.

## Introduction

The purpose of this report is to summarize the results of an intensive architectural analysis of the Van Cortlandt drawing and to document the methods by which the information contained in this unique document were combined with data from numerous other sources to more accurately portray the interior design of the House of Representatives chamber of Congress Hall.

When the architects, curators and historians at Independence National Historical Park labored to restore Congress Hall during the late 1950s, a tremendous amount of information was assembled from a combination of sources. Intensive archival research uncovered official records covering the construction and renovation of the building and its interior appointments. Letters, diaries and newspaper accounts were located which described the building and the events which transpired there. The building itself revealed detailed information as its fabric was carefully studied and documented. In addition, the photos, notes and drawings of Congress Hall's 1900-1912 restoration were studied.

The product of that team's efforts was the total restoration of the building including the refurnishing of the chambers of both houses of Congress and their adjacent support spaces. The many discoveries and decisions which supported the restoration were documented in historic structure reports and historic furnishings plans. The thoroughness with which these documents were prepared have inspired great confidence in the accuracy of

Congress Hall's restoration. In addition, these reports carefully document the degree to which the physical realization of some features of the restoration were based on educated conjecture and interpolation. This has allowed for incremental improvement to the building's interpretation as new information has been found.

It was in this spirit of improvement that the interpretation of the Van Cortlandt drawing was pursued. In 1992, Associate Curator Karie Diethorn and Museum Intern John Bacon focused their attention on the existing interpretation of the House of Representatives Chamber. They examined a number of archival documents that had come to light subsequent to the completion of the 1961 restoration, in particular a drawing by Philip Van Cortlandt, a Federal period Congressman, depicting a seating plan for the House Chamber. This drawing was unknown to the 1961 restoration team until most of the work was complete, including the platforms and desks in the House Chamber. Other than a pair of 18th century cartoons, no graphic representation of the House chamber had been located to guide the restoration. Van Cortlandt's drawing, while somewhat crude and diagrammatic, represents the only graphically descriptive evidence about the plan of the Representatives' desks.

In the course of their research, Diethorn and Bacon developed a strong case for revising the existing layout of the House members' desks.<sup>1</sup> To their credit, they recognized that the

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<sup>1</sup>Karie Diethorn, Associate Curator and John Bacon, Friends of Independence National Historical Park Museum Intern, Furnishing Plan for the First Floor of Congress Hall, Supplement

drawing contained clues describing the plan of the House desks prior to the building's enlargement in 1793. In the following report, the author has attempted to carefully refine the architectural implications of the premise established by Diethorn and Bacon and to make a strong clear case for a reinterpretation of the House Chamber that encompasses the information distilled from the Van Cortlandt drawing.

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1. A Study of the Historic Philip Van Cortlandt Seating Plan and its Impact on the Refurnishing of the House of Representatives Chamber, Independence National Historical Park, September 1992. Hereafter cited as 1992 Furnishing Plan, Supplement 1.

## Chapter 1

### General Chronology of Construction Activity in the House Chamber in Congress Hall

#### a. Late 18th-century Construction and Modification:

The construction history of Congress Hall is fully explained and documented in the historic structure report of 1960.<sup>2</sup>

##### a.1. Construction of the Building, 1787-1789:

Occupying a site on the southeast corner of Sixth and Chestnut Street, the building referred to as Congress Hall was constructed from 1787 to 1789 to house the courts and offices of the County of Philadelphia. The intention to locate such a structure next to the Pennsylvania State House was demonstrated as early as 1736 when properties on either side of the new State House were acquired by Andrew Hamilton.<sup>3</sup> Hamilton envisioned a monumental range of governmental buildings, symmetrically arranged with the Pennsylvania State House at its center. (This scheme was not fully realized until the completion of Old City Hall in 1791).

Described as "lately finished" on March 27, 1789,<sup>4</sup> the new county court house was deemed to be a great asset to the city.

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<sup>2</sup>Historic Structure Report on Congress Hall, Part I (INDE, May 1959).

<sup>3</sup>His plan was that "two public Buildings are to be erected, of like outward Form (sic), Structure and Dimensions, the one for the Use of the County, and the other for the Use of the City of Philadelphia and are to be for the Holding of Courts, or Common Halls, and not for Private Dwellings." Pa. Archives, Ser. VIII, v. III, 1736, 2355-56.

<sup>4</sup>Stat. at Large of Pa., XIII, 277.

Very little documentation has been found to describe the interior appointments of the building prior to its subsequent use by Congress, however it is likely that the first floor consisted of a stair hall and a single large court room. Within the court room stood four large wood columns which supported the second floor structure above.

a.2. Renovations for Federal Congress, 1790:

When preparations were being made to accommodate the Federal Government in Philadelphia in 1790, the new court house was selected as the structure most suitable as the venue for both houses of Congress. Other structures considered for this use included the new City Hall, then under construction on the opposite side of the State House from the county court house, and the State House itself. There was also some interest in the construction of a new building for Congress, a proposal which got little support from the thrifty local legislators.

Once the decision was made to house Congress in the new court house, the building was quickly refitted in time for the start of the Third Session of the First Congress on December 6, 1790. Over a period of less than three months, the court furnishings were removed and the interior of the building was modified and refurnished. In the House Chamber, a new raised gallery was constructed for visitors. Raised platforms were built for the Speaker of the House and for the members' seating. Fine mahogany desks and upholstered arm chairs were provided for the

members in addition to the tables and chairs made for the Speaker and for the clerks.

a.3. Enlargement of 1793:

In 1793, in order to accommodate the increase in the membership of the House of Representatives, Congress Hall was enlarged. The south wall of the original structure was removed and the overall building was lengthened 27'-7" to the south. As in the original construction, a large roughly octagonal bay was built in the new southern wall. On the inside, the House of Representatives Chamber was likewise lengthened by the same 27'-7". The use of trussed walls and iron hangers in the structure of the roof and second floor made possible the removal of the southern pair of wood columns of the House Chamber and the creation of a nearly column-free space in which to arrange the enlarge group of members' desks and chairs.<sup>5</sup> The Speaker's platform was moved to the west wall and a new doorway directly opposite in the east wall led into the portico, a vestibule space reserved for House members.<sup>6</sup> As in 1790, a tremendous amount of work seems to have been accomplished in a relatively short amount

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<sup>5</sup>The location of the southern pair of columns and the timing of their removal is well established. A photo taken in 1961 during the last restoration shows the underside of the 1787 girder initially supported on these columns. Based on strong physical evidence, the restoration architects concluded that the columns were in place from 1787 until their removal in 1793. INHP photo #157.1178.

<sup>6</sup>Columbian Centinel, (Boston), May 22, 1793. This reference will be discussed more fully in Chapter 2.

of time.<sup>7</sup>

b. Return to County Use After 1800:

There were no other major alterations to the ground floor of Congress Hall until after the Federal Government moved to Washington, D.C. in 1800. At that time, the building returned to court use. The interior furnishings of the House of Representatives had been commissioned and paid for by the State of Pennsylvania and so were not taken to Washington. Instead, many of these furnishings were taken to Lancaster to be used in the Temporary quarters of the state government. It appears that many, if not all, of the Representatives' desks were left in Philadelphia.<sup>8</sup> It is likely that the raised platforms for the Speaker's chair and House members' desks were removed as soon as Congress left. Their shape and orientation would have rendered them useless for the county court's purposes.

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<sup>7</sup>This renovation was begun after the close of the Second Session of the Second Congress on March 2, 1793 and was largely completed by the opening of the First Session of the Third Congress on December 6, 1793.

<sup>8</sup>As late as 1812, Charles Willson Peale described seeing remnants of these desks still in storage. "...furniture left here consists of some long mahogany Tables of the form of a segment of a Circle, & some chairs, all of which I see packed with care in the East wing up stairs..." C.W. Peale, MSS, Letter-Books, XII, 54-55 (March 3, 1812), American Philosophical Society. For a detailed discussion of the fate of the Congress Hall furniture, see Furnishing Plan for the Second Floor of Congress Hall, Parts A-D (Independence National Historical Park, 1965).

At some point between 1800 and 1818, the interior space of the former House Chamber was further altered. The raised gallery was removed and a pair of offices were carved out of the northern end of the former legislative chamber.<sup>9</sup>

b.1. Major Interior Alteration of 1818:

In 1818, a major interior alteration was carried out on Congress Hall. The stairways were removed from the north vestibule. An east-west hallway was inserted across the center of the first floor and a new entrance was cut into the western wall along Sixth Street. A stairway was inserted into the new cross hall and two large court rooms were created to the north and south of the new hallway. These changes obliterated the space that had comprised the House of Representatives Chamber. However, much of the original building fabric was left in place or reused during these alterations, allowing for the room's eventual restoration.

c. Restoration Activities:

c.1. Investigation and Restoration 1900-1913:

By the end of the 19th-century, Congress Hall was in very poor condition. The Committee of Thirteen of the Pennsylvania Society of the Colonial Dames of American had led efforts to restore the old Senate Chamber in the second floor in 1895.<sup>10</sup>

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<sup>9</sup>See Historic Structure Report, Part II, Architectural Data Section on Congress Hall, Independence National Historical Park, April 1960. Chapter II, Section II, p. 83.

<sup>10</sup>Pa. Mag. Hist. and Biog., Vol. XXII, p. 252.

No restoration work was performed on the first floor of the building at that time.

In 1900 a committee was formed of the Philadelphia Chapter of the American Institute of Architects to study Congress Hall's condition and its history and to plan for its restoration. The members of this committee undertook an extensive analysis of the building's architectural fabric and concluded that there was sufficient information left on which to base an accurate restoration.<sup>11</sup> These investigations uncovered evidence for the restoration of the northern stair vestibule with its twin stairways, the visitors' gallery for the House Chamber and the 18th-century locations for the wood columns in the House Chamber. The building was substantially restored in 1912-1913 under the guidance of the A.I.A. Committee.

The restoration of the raised platforms for the members' desks was not attempted at that time, although the original 18th-century flooring had been found to survive and showed the shape and location of the platforms and the outer bar.<sup>12</sup> The A.I.A.

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<sup>11</sup>"Committee Report of the Philadelphia Chapter A.I.A., in re: The Restoration of Congress Hall", March 1, 1901, Independence National Historical Park Archives, Records of the Architectural Office, late 1940s-1950s.

<sup>12</sup>"...upon removing some modern flooring, parts of the original floor of the house...were disclosed, clearly indicating the location at the western side of the hall of the Speaker's platform and elsewhere of the bar of the house, which seems to have described a curve enclosing the last row of seats...Feeling that except as their shape in plan, a restoration of the platforms and the bar would be merely conjectural, the Committee decided not to attempt it." Taken from "An Address Upon the Occasion of the Reopening of Congress Hall after its Restoration", delivered October 25, 1913 by Frank Miles Day,

committee members decided that there was insufficient information about the appearance of the desks and railings upon which to base their restoration.<sup>13</sup> One small section of the original flooring was left in place along the west wall. The A.I.A. members believed that this was the location of the Speaker's platform.<sup>14</sup> Unfortunately, the A.I.A. members failed to detect the location of the 1793 doorway to the portico. This doorway had been filled in and replaced with a window, presumably when the portico was demolished.

c.2. Restoration of Platforms and Dais, 1934:

After its 1912-1913 restoration, Congress Hall was used to house various historical artifacts and the House Chamber was used to exhibit a collection of paintings depicting historical scenes. In 1928 Independence Hall Curator Wilfred Jordan began to research the design and construction of the furnishings used by Congress during the 1790's. Jordan was aware of the Federal Hall desks which survived in New York City and attempted to trace

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A.I.A. in charge of the restoration. Independence National Historical Park Manuscript Collection, E.M. Yardley Papers, Cat. #4568.

<sup>13</sup>The physical evidence found on the 18th-century flooring was documented in photos and drawings by the A.I.A. committee, however this documentation cannot be found. Without the benefit of examining the physical evidence, it is impossible to know what the members of the A.I.A. actually saw. They may have misinterpreted evidence from courtroom furnishings which existed before 1790 or after 1800.

<sup>14</sup>The evidence on this flooring is documented in INHP photo #6288.

their connection to the desks used in Congress Hall.<sup>15</sup>

Jordan's efforts culminated in the construction, in 1934, of a raised platform for the Speaker of the House and raised platforms for the House members' seating. The drawings for this restoration were prepared under the guidance of the Philadelphia Chapter of the A.I.A. Horace Wells Sellers, longtime chairman of the Committee for the Preservation of Historic Monuments of the Philadelphia Chapter of the A.I.A. was actively involved in the design of this restoration.<sup>16</sup> The platforms and the curving bar were finally constructed in 1934 but the desks and chairs were never constructed. The House Chamber remained in this condition until the National Park Service began to study the building in the late 1950s and reached different conclusions about the size, shape and position of the House seating.

c.3. Investigations and Restoration  
by the National Park Service, 1959-1961:

In 1959, the staff of Independence National Historical Park undertook an extensive study and analysis of Congress Hall. Additional archival documentation was located enabling the park's staff to refine many aspects of the building's restoration. In

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<sup>15</sup>The correspondence files from Wilfred Jordan's tenure as Independence Hall Curator contain many letters tracing his research into this subject. These files are housed in the offices of the Cultural Resources Management Division at Independence National Historical Park.

<sup>16</sup>Ibid. The correspondence files of Wilfred Jordan also contain many letters from Horace Wells Sellers which, when combined with the drawings from the 1934 restoration, confirm the source of the design for this restoration attempt.

particular, a much clearer picture emerged about the layout of the House Chamber. It was found that when the portico had been built in 1793, a new door had been cut through the east wall of Congress Hall. The center aisle through the House members' seating led directly from this door to the Speaker's platform at the western wall. These facts make it clear that the 1934 reconstruction of the platforms and Speaker's dais were incorrect. Unfortunately, other than a pair of cartoons, no specific graphic or physical evidence was located describing the plan of the House seating.<sup>17</sup>

In 1961, INDE Curator Fred Hanson designed a detailed restoration plan for the House Chamber. Hanson relied heavily on the written descriptions of the House from the 18th-century that consistently referred to three concentric rows of desks in the shape of a semi-circle or semi-ellipse.<sup>18</sup> All of the desks in Hanson's scheme are curved and there are no side aisles. In detailing the House desks, Hanson synthesized information from the surviving Federal Hall desks, surviving examples of Federal

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<sup>17</sup>Great effort was made to locate surviving Congress Hall furnishings however none of the House or Senate members' desks were found. In 1978, an interesting desk was purchased by INDE through an auction house in New York. Curator Charles Dorman believed that this desk could have come from the Congress Hall House Chamber. While it is stylistically related to the "Declaration Desk" and it appears to have been a part of a larger curving ensemble, its provenance could not be established and so its origins remain a mystery. Nevertheless, this desk contains many intriguing features and deserves further study. It is INDE Cat. # 11,687 and it is currently stored in the Second Bank Storage Area A.

<sup>18</sup>The 18th-century references to the House seating will be more fully described in Chapter 2.

period Philadelphia writing desks and the detailing of the so-called "Declaration Desk".<sup>19</sup> The design of the curved bar around the back of the platforms combined information drawn from the detailing of the House Chamber's wainscoting and other interior joinery.

c.4. Evaluation of the Van Cortlandt Drawing, 1992:

When the 1961 restoration was nearly complete, a drawing by Philip Van Cortlandt was brought to the attention of the restoration team at Congress Hall. This drawing, available too late to impact the design of the 1961 installation, appeared to show a seating design with both curved and straight desks and side aisles. For unknown reasons, the architectural implications of the Van Cortlandt drawing were not explored until 1992 when Associate Curator Karie Diethorn and Museum Intern John Bacon attempted to date the drawing and to discern its architectural implications.<sup>20</sup>

In the course of their investigations, Diethorn and Bacon were able to carefully establish that Van Cortlandt made the

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<sup>19</sup>The "Declaration Desk" (INDE Cat. # 11827) is one of the few pieces of Federal period furniture that had survived many decades of use by the state government in Lancaster and Harrisburg. By the middle of the 19th-century it was erroneously believed to have been in use during the signing of the Declaration of Independence, hence its moniker "Declaration Desk". In 1867, it was sent to Philadelphia and exhibited in Independence Hall.

<sup>20</sup>1992 Furnishing Plan, Supplement 1.

drawing between late winter and early spring of 1796.<sup>21</sup> In addition, they noticed that the two sections of desks in the drawing that were mostly curved contained approximately the same number of seats as were required prior to the enlargement of 1793. They also knew that only a small number of desks were purchased during the 1793 renovation. From this realization, Diethorn and Bacon established the likelihood that large portions of the seating plan from 1790-93 were repositioned in 1793 and augmented with additional straight desks. The investigations described in this report have sought to more fully explore the architectural implications of their initial findings.

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<sup>21</sup>Ibid, p. 14.

Chapter 2:  
Specific Evidence Relating to the  
Design of the House Seating

In order to assess the architectural impact of the Van Cortlandt drawing on the interpretation of the House of Representatives Chamber, the author reexamined all of the available information. After studying the history of Congress Hall and the voluminous records relating to its construction and renovations, it became apparent that there were very few direct references to the design or construction of the members' desks in the House Chamber. The following chapter describes the pieces of the historical record found by the author to provide pertinent information on which to base a plausible design for the seating plan.

a. Architectural Features of the House Chamber:

Most of the interior features of the House Chamber in Congress Hall are well documented and can be used to create an architectural backdrop for the seating plan. The current configuration of the room represents the period 1793-1800. Since Van Cortlandt apparently drew the sketch in 1796, it should be compatible with the existing space.

It is well established that the speaker's dais was located on the west side of the chamber. A major aisle ran through the member's seating directly from the dais to a doorway in the east wall. This was an important doorway, leading into the Portico, or Lobby room. There were two wood columns at the northern end of

the room supporting the raised gallery. Somewhere to the north of these columns stood the railing that separated the visitors' lower gallery from the floor area reserved for House business. Considering the location of the western column of the pair, it would undoubtedly have impacted any arrangement of the desks and platforms placed in the room.

Other features of the space that may have impacted the design of the seating include the numerous fireplaces with open stove inserts, the southern bay and its flanking pair of doorways (See Illustration # 8).

While considering the design of the room during the period 1793-1800, it is valuable to reflect on its design prior to the building's enlargement in 1793 (See Illustration #7). During this period there were two additional columns in the room supporting the Senate chamber above. The seating plan of 1790-1793 would have been carefully fitted within these columns.

b. Preparations for Congress, 1790

Numerous letters survive which portray the political dealings that brought the national government to Philadelphia in 1790. Among these letters are a few that describe the activities which culminated in Congress Hall being ready to receive Congress on December 6, 1790. The decision to refit the new court house was not made until the beginning of September of that year. This left less than three months in which to plan and carry out the work necessary for accommodating the Senate, House of

Representatives and their various support spaces. Once this decision was made, however, there was little time wasted.

The most challenging aspect of the renovations to the new court house that faced the Philadelphia commissioners was undoubtedly the creation of a suitable chamber of the House of Representatives. Within the existing architectural envelope of the first floor courtroom, they were required to devise a seating arrangement that contained enough desks and chairs for each Representative. When the federal government moved to Philadelphia in 1790, for the second term of the First Congress, the House of Representatives contained sixty-five.<sup>22</sup> Since one member occupied the Speaker's chair, there had to be desks for sixty-four members in the original 1790 plan. By the end of the Second Congress in March 1793, the House contained two additional members. These two seats were either added during the Second Congress or were included when Congress Hall was initially fitted for Congress.

From a related series of letters, it is possible to piece together the development of the project. On September 4, 1790, Miers Fisher, a member of the committee formed by the Philadelphia city corporation to prepare Congress' accommodations, wrote a letter to Tench Coxe, another Philadelphian who was assistant to the Secretary of the

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<sup>22</sup>All information on the size of the Federal Congress was taken from the Biographical Directory of the United States Congress 1774-1989 (Washington, DC: United States Government Printing Office, 1989), pp. 51-56.

U.S.Treasury serving in New York. This letter provides invaluable insight into the history of the House Chamber.

Philada Sept 4 1790

My dear Friend

Yesterday a Committee of the Corporation, (Quorum unus ego) waited on the Members of Congress for Pennsylvania to view the public Buildings in this City to determine which of these should be fitted up for the accommodation of that Body, & they chose the County Court House as in their Opinion perfectly adequate to the necessary Purposes for both Houses--The Committee ordered to lay a Run & Estimates of the necessary Alterations & Furniture before the board. I have in my Head a tolerable Recollection of the Plan of both Houses at New York from whence I have sketched out Plans for our Buildings, but when one comes to lay down so complex a thing on Paper mostly from the Memory one will find many things that we have not accurately attended to; this is my Case & I intended to have supplied the Deficient Parts with the help of the Committee from our own Inventions; but hearing that Thomas Affleck (whom thou must know to be one of the finest[?] Cabinet Makers here) was going to New York on private Business I have advised him to view the Federal Hall & take drafts of all the Seats, Desks, & other Furniture & Accomdations, to enable him to furnish Plans with more Accuracy; as he will stand as fair a Chance for the Job as any other Person he agrees to take his Instruments & bring Away Drafts of what he shall think necessary...

I recommend him to thy best Advice & I am \_\_\_\_\_  
thy affectionate Friend  
Miers Fisher<sup>23</sup>

A few days later, Tench Coxe wrote a letter to the mayor of New York requesting permission for Affleck's visit.

Sir.

The Bearer, Mr. Thomas Affleck, a citizen of Philadelphia, being here on his present business is desirous

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<sup>23</sup>Letter of September 4, 1790, Miers Fisher, Philadelphia to Tench Coxe, New York. Tench Coxe Papers, Historical Society of Pennsylvania.

of taking a sketch of the Halls of the Senate and House of Representatives for the use of some of his friends in our Corporation. The purpose for which it may be wanted is to make a similar arrangement of seats, tables, and other accommodations for the President of the Senate, the Speaker of the Representatives and the Members of the two bodies-if it is agreeable to you I request the favor of your permission for Mr. Affleck's viewing the Apartments.

I am, sir  
very respectfully  
your obedt & hum Serv t  
Tench Coxe<sup>24</sup>

Later that same month, Thomas Affleck wrote a letter to Tench Coxe in which he further describes the events in Philadelphia:

Felidae 16 Sept 1790

Sir

...I have presented the Drafts of the Federal hall for which I took at New York; to the Corporation of this City and mentioned to them your Friendly assistance in procuring me Liberty from the Mayor to take so minute a measurement of Each apartment and furniture with which they are much pleased they have already pulled down all the Inside of the new Court house and are going on with great spirit to fit it up in the best and most Comodious manner and have Engaged me to make the Furniture nearly on the same plan with that at N York City-the new City Hall goes on Rapidly and by the time you Remove this will make a handsome figure and I hope will meet your Aprobation

I am with Esteem Yours

Thos Affleck<sup>25</sup>

A record of expenses incurred during the 1790 renovations of Congress Hall survive and show that Affleck was indeed paid for

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<sup>24</sup>Letter of September 7, 1790. Tench Coxe, Treasury Office, to Richard Varick, Mayor of New York. Pierpont Morgan Library.

<sup>25</sup>Letter of September 16, 1790. Thomas Affleck, Philadelphia, to Tench Coxe, New York. Tench Coxe Papers, Historical Society of Pennsylvania.

providing a significant amount of furniture.<sup>26</sup> Out of a total expenditure of slightly over 2,200 pounds, Affleck was paid 469 pounds, 5 shillings. It is generally assumed that this amount covered the construction of all of the desks and chairs for the members of both houses of Congress in addition to several desks and chairs for the Speaker of the House, the President of the Senate and their respective secretaries. Considering the sheer quantity of furniture produced and installed in less than three months, it is likely that Affleck engaged the help of other cabinet shops in addition to relying on the craftsmen from his own shop. It is also likely that, in hurrying to design and build this furniture, the craftsmen minimized the complexity of form and ornamentation.

Payment vouchers also survive which document the expansion of Congress Hall in 1793. On December 15, 1793, Affleck was paid 100 pounds for "80 feet of mahogany desks with drawers for [Congress] @ 25/."<sup>27</sup> On January 10, 1794, an additional payment went to Affleck for "an addition of 2 feet 6 inches to a Table for Congress @ 25."<sup>28</sup> The lack of payments for any additional desks strongly suggests that the House furniture from 1790 was

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<sup>26</sup>Disbursements Paid for Fitting Up Congress Hall in 1790, from manuscript at the Pennsylvania Historical and Museum Commission, Harrisburg. A complete transcript of this document can be found in Furnishing Plan for the First Floor of Congress Hall (INDE, March 1961), Appendix B, pp. 1-2.

<sup>27</sup>Voucher 193, "Vouchers 1793-94", State Records Office, Pennsylvania State Archives.

<sup>28</sup>Ibid, Voucher 194.

not replaced during the 1793 expansion, rather it was reused and augmented with new desks.<sup>29</sup>

Of the furniture supplied by Affleck, the only known survivors are a few of the secretaries' desks and approximately fifty of the members' upholstered arm chairs. The so-called "Declaration Desk" was brought back to Philadelphia from Harrisburg in 1867, having been thought to date from the pre-Revolutionary period.<sup>30</sup> A similar desk, known as the "Secretary's Desk", is also attributed to Affleck.<sup>31</sup> A portion of a third desk was found in York, Pennsylvania and brought to INDE in 1964.<sup>32</sup> Together with the arm chairs, these desks help to describe the design and detailing that was used in the original construction of the House of Representatives desks in 1790.<sup>33</sup>

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<sup>29</sup>The case for this interpretation of the archival evidence was well stated in the 1992 Furnishing Report, Supplement 1.

<sup>30</sup>INDE Cat. No. 11827. This desk is now exhibited in the Senate Chamber on the second floor of Congress Hall.

<sup>31</sup>INDE Cat. No. 11829. The "Secretary's Desk" is currently exhibited in the Secretary's Office on the second floor of Congress Hall.

<sup>32</sup>INHP Cat. No. 4184. This is the "Rupp Desk", purchased from an elderly woman in York, Pennsylvania. It had been in use in use in the State Capitol in Harrisburg until the mid-19th-century. It consists of one bank of drawers from a desk that was identical to the "Declaration Desk". On the bottom of one of its drawers was found a chalk sketch which is believed to represent the design of the Senate Chamber dais railing. The "Rupp Desk" is currently stored in the Second Bank Storage Room A.

<sup>33</sup>For a thorough analysis of the history and construction of the surviving Congress Hall furnishings, see Furnishing Plan for the Second Floor of Congress Hall, Part D (Independence National Historical Park, 1965).

b.1. Miers Fisher Drawing of Old City Hall:

Another source of information about the dimensions required for the design of the House desks is a document produced during the period of debate about a suitable site for Congress. One drawing has survived dating from the same period as the letters described above (See Illustration # 5).<sup>34</sup> This drawing shows a proposal for housing the House of Representatives in the City Hall building, now known as Old City Hall. It was drawn during September 1790, and probably predates Miers Fisher's letter of September 4, since it appears that the decision had not yet been made to use the new county court building for Congress. In this drawing, there are curved rows of desks for the members on raised platforms. There are a few steps up to the rear curved bar leading to a center aisle.

The Speaker's platform in Fisher's drawing is located in the southern octagonal bay and there are corner fireplaces inserted into each corner of the room. The text of the drawing gave appropriate dimensions for the widths of the aisles and desks and the necessary clearances between the desks. Fisher stated that a width of 20-24" for each desk was sufficient. In fact, the surviving Congress Hall armchairs measure approximately 24" in width.<sup>35</sup> Fisher further stated that he had left a passage of 3'

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<sup>34</sup>"Plan of the City Hall of Philadelphia as it may be laid out...for the Representatives of the United States", September 1790. Miers Fisher Papers, Historical Society of Pennsylvania.

<sup>35</sup>In 1959 Museum Curator Vernon Tancil measured all of the Congress Hall chairs then in the INHP collection. He found that the widths of the seats varied from 23-1/2" to 24-5/16". See

for the center aisle and a clearance of 3'-3" between the rows of desks. The corner fireplaces may have been intended to make the room resemble the House of Representatives Chamber in Federal Hall, described as having a roughly octagonal shape.<sup>36</sup>

Another aspect of Fisher's drawing that deserves discussion concerns the seating capacity specified for the room. As drawn the room accommodates, "96 Chairs for the Representatives of the United States, or in the Case of need by putting the Chairs nearer together 106- as 2f are allowed for each Chair whereas 20 Inches is sufficient."<sup>37</sup> It is significant that in 1790 there were only sixty-five members in the House of Representatives. The First Federal Census, taken in 1790, was expected to increase the House membership significantly for the Third Federal Congress in 1793. The fact that Miers Fisher made the claim that this 1790 plan could seat 106 members is noteworthy since the Third Federal Congress actually had 106 members.<sup>38</sup>

Miers Fisher's drawing of 1790 offers two important types of information. The dimensions given for the desks and aisles

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Furnishing Plan for the First Floor of Congress Hall,  
Independence National Historical Park, 1959. Appendix C, pp. 1-2.

<sup>36</sup>For descriptions of the House of Representatives in Federal Hall, see Louis Torres, "Federal Hall Revisited," Journal of the Society of Architectural Historians, 29 (December 1970):329.

<sup>37</sup>"Plan of the City Hall of Philadelphia as it may be laid out...for the Representatives of the United States", September 1790. Miers Fisher Papers, Historical Society of Pennsylvania.

<sup>38</sup>Biographical Directory of the United States Congress, 1774-1989, Bicentennial Edition (United States Government Printing Office, 1989), pp. 55-56.

provide crucial data on which to base a reconstruction. The fact that Fisher was looking ahead to the inevitable increase in the number of House members in 1793 may also suggest that the expansion of the House Chamber in 1793 was methodically planned and executed. It could be argued that the interior renovations to Congress Hall in 1790 were simply the first phase of a plan which was not fully carried out until 1793. In other words, in 1790 the designers of the House Chamber and its furnishings anticipated the building's eventual enlargement of 1793.

#### b.2. Evolution of House Membership

One of the key pieces of information concerning the design of the House Chamber is the number of Congressmen who were accommodated in the chamber. When the Third Session of the First Congress convened in Congress Hall on December 6, 1790, there were sixty-five members.<sup>39</sup> Since one House member served as the Speaker, there should have been desks for sixty-four members. By the end of the Second Session of the Second Federal Congress on March 2, 1793, there were sixty-seven members requiring at least sixty-six desks. At the start of the First Session of the Third Congress on December 2, 1793, after the expansion of Congress Hall, there were 105 members and one delegate from the territory that eventually became the state of Tennessee.

At the time of Van Cortlandt's drawing, in 1796, there should have been desks and chairs for at least 105 members. Of

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<sup>39</sup>Ibid, pp. 51-56.

these 105 desks, at least sixty-six were in existence prior to the 1793 enlargement and thirty-nine were added in 1793. The sixty-six earlier desks would therefore have been installed in the House Chamber when it was much smaller and contained the four columns described in Chapter 1. It should be possible to distill from Van Cortlandt's drawing the desks from the earlier period.

c. Descriptive Evidence

The archival evidence referenced above generally describes the planning and construction of the House furnishings. Other pieces of evidence have been examined that describe the appearance of the House Chamber after its construction.

c.1. Written Descriptions of the House Chamber, 1790-1800:

A number of historical references have been located that contain descriptions of the House of Representatives in Congress Hall. On the eve of the enlargement of the building in 1793, the following statement appeared in a newspaper:

"Preparations are in forwardness for enlarging the County Court-House to accommodate the next Federal Legislature. The southern side of the building is to be pulled down and rebuilt 24 feet south from its present situation. The seats will preserve the oval form, but the Speaker's chair is to be removed to the west side of the House and the principal entrance to the hall of the House of Representatives will be to the east and immediately opposite the speaker's seat."<sup>40</sup>

One of the more thorough descriptions was given by Henry Wansey who visited the building in 1794.

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<sup>40</sup>Columbian Centinel (Boston), May 22, 1793.

"...On entering the House of Representatives, I was struck with the convenient arrangement of the seats of the members. The size of the chamber was about one hundred feet by sixty. The seats in three rows formed semi-circles behind each other, facing the Speaker, who was in a kind of pulpit near the centre of the radii, and the clerks below him. Every member was accommodated for writing, by there being likewise a circular writing desk to each of the circular seats..."<sup>41</sup>

In a letter to his daughter in 1796, Congressman Theophilus Bradbury wrote the following description of the House of Representatives Chamber:

"...The Members' seats are 3 rows of desks, rising one above another in the form of a semi-circle, opposite the Speaker; these are writing-desks with large armed chairs with leather bottoms. There is a lock and key to each desk and places on the desks for ink, pens, sand, and a plentiful supply of paper..."<sup>42</sup>

Nicholas King wrote a journal describing his travels in America in which he described the members' seats as follows:

"...in three parallel semielliptic rows rising above each other leaving a small area between them and the Speaker's and Secretary's seats which are in the center of the semiellipse..."<sup>43</sup>

In 1798 a fist fight erupted on the floor of the House between two members of Congress, Matthew Lyon of Connecticut and Roger Griswold of Rhode Island. Other members of the House who witnessed the fight later described the event in detailed

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<sup>41</sup>David John Jeremy, ed., Henry Wansey and His American Journal, 1794 (Philadelphia, PA: American Philosophical Society, 1970), p. 96.

<sup>42</sup>Letter, Theophilus Bradbury to Harriet Bradbury, December 26, 1795. Reprinted in Pennsylvania Magazine of History and Biography 8(1884):226.

<sup>43</sup>Nicholas King, "Journal of Observations and Occurrences in a Voyage from England to America in the Year 1793" (Typescript, Huntington Library).

depositions. The written transcripts of their testimonies contain many references to features of the room. Typical the these is the following: "...Mr. Lyons, when assaulted, was sitting in his place, having a long circular desk, which is screwed to the floor, before him, and a similar one behind."<sup>44</sup> Mr Haven, another Congressman, testified that "I was walking in the south end of the hall without the bar, and saw My. Lyon come in , with his cloak on, and go to his seat, which is the fourth from the end of that front row of seats which is on the left side of the passage leading up to the Speaker's chair."<sup>45</sup>

c.2. Graphic Evidence:

There are three known pieces of evidence for the House Chamber providing graphic information. There are two cartoons drawn to depict the Lyon-Griswold fight. These images are shown in Illustration #3 and Illustration #4. "Congressional Pugilists" drawn by William Cobbett shows the raised Speaker's platform and connected members' desks described in written records. Otherwise the House Chamber in Cobbett's cartoon is very inaccurately rendered. For instance, the windows are shown with square heads instead of the arches that still survive.

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<sup>44</sup>This account was contained in a newspaper article about the fight. Aurora: General Advertiser February 22, 1798, p. 3, col. 2.

<sup>45</sup>Mr. Haven's Testimony, Carey's U.S. Recorder, February 22, 1798. Written transcripts of these testimonies are contained in the History Note Card File, Independence National Historical Park.

The other cartoon, "Cudgeling as by late Act in Congress, USA," appears to be quite deftly drawn and is compatible with the known evidence about the room. The proximity of the fireplace to the rear of the Speaker's platform appears to be correct. The arched top of the window behind the Speaker's platform is well rendered with its curtains and in the background can be detected the three arched windows in the south bay. The members' desks are shown as three rows of continuous desks with a solid railing behind. The front row of desks, however, appears as individual desks with fabric draped over their fronts. The depositions from the 1798 fight clearly described the difficulty with which Matthew Lyon extricated himself from his seat behind the interconnected desks on the front row.<sup>46</sup> While the overall appearance of the desks is curving, the desks to the left appear to be generally straight, while the desks in the background appear to bend sharply around a corner. There are no aisles shown on this cartoon.

The third piece of graphic evidence is the Van Cortlandt drawing of 1796 (See Illustration # 10). This drawing may have been drawn as a reference tool by Philip Van Cortlandt to keep track of the names of the House members during the controversial debates concerning the Jay Treaty.<sup>47</sup> Although this drawing is

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<sup>46</sup>"Mr. Lyon, when assaulted, was sitting in his place, having a long circular desk, which is screwed to the floor, before him, and a similar one behind." Newspaper account of the fight, Aurora: General Advertiser February 22, 1798, p. 3, col. 2.

<sup>47</sup>See 1992 Furnishing Plan, Supplement 1, pp. 15-16.

crudely rendered, it appears to show the House members arranged in a broad U-shaped plan around the Speaker's platform and clerks' desks. There appear to be both straight and curving desks, divided by a central aisle opposite from the Speaker's platform as well as by two minor side aisles.

c.3. Physical Evidence:

Another useful source of information are the surviving desks from Federal Hall in New York. These desks, preserved at the New York Historical Society, were used by the House of Representatives of the First Congress during its stay in New York from 1789 to 1790. They were part of a larger group arranged in curving rows in front of the Speaker's chair.<sup>48</sup> As was discussed above, these desks were examined and documented by Thomas Affleck in September, 1790, while still in use by the First Federal Congress. Affleck had been instructed to survey the furnishings and fittings of the two houses of Congress by Miers Fisher. It can be comfortably argued that Affleck finally produced desks of similar configuration and grouped in similar fashion. The Federal Hall desks allow approximately 20-23 inches per person. One of

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<sup>48</sup>Torres, pp. 329-330. Of the two lengthy descriptions of the Federal Hall interiors reproduced in "Federal Hall Revisited", only one mentions the number of rows of desks in the House Chamber and their shape: "...the chairs for the members are ranged semicircularly in two rows in front of the speaker." (The Massachusetts Magazine June 1789). It is believed, by the author of the present report, that there were more likely three rows of desks in Federal Hall. The author attempted to lay out the Federal Hall desks in the space described by Torres and concluded that, given the curvature of the surviving desks, a third row was necessary to accommodate the full number of seats.

the desk seats four persons and the other seats only two. Close examination of the shorter desk reveals anomalies which suggest that it was originally longer, perhaps also seating four. Both desks are fourteen inches deep and thirty inches tall.

Other information which belongs in the category of physical evidence was uncovered during the restoration of Congress Hall in 1912. During the interior renovations, it was discovered that 18th-century flooring remained in place beneath later flooring layers. As Frank Miles Day recalled,

"...upon removing some modern flooring, parts of the original floor of the house...were disclosed, clearly indicating the location at the western side of the hall of the Speaker's platform and elsewhere of the bar of the house, which seems to have described a curve enclosing the last row of seats...Feeling that except as to their shape in plan, a restoration of the platforms and the bar would be merely conjectural, the Committee decided not to attempt it."<sup>49</sup>

In another reference to this discovery, Horace Wells Sellers wrote:

"..The removal of the modern flooring disclosed the original floor of the House of Representatives with indications of the exact position of the railings, platforms, etc. which had originally existed, but this floor was so badly decayed by dampness and time as to render it unfit for use with the exception, fortunately, of a small area on the Sixth Street side on which is clearly indicated the position of the Speaker's platform, and its enclosing rail, which section of floor has been preserved intact. Before removing the flooring elsewhere a careful survey was made of the surfaces to locate the mortise holes so that a record might be kept of the original plan showing the lines

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<sup>49</sup>"An Address Upon the Occasion of the Reopening of Congress Hall After its Restoration," delivered October 25, 1913, by Frank Miles Day, Chairman of the Committee of the Philadelphia Chapter, A.I.A. in charge of the Restoration. A copy of this address was found the E.M.Yardley Collection, Independence National Historical Park Manuscript Collection.

of a railing which separated the space occupied by the members of the House from that set apart for visitors."<sup>50</sup>

It is important to remember that while the A.I.A. restoration team appears to have seen actual evidence for the platforms, bar and Speaker's platform, they seem to have interpreted this evidence inaccurately. Instead of locating the Speaker's platform, they probably found the imprint of a later jury box or other post-1800 piece of courtroom furniture. The A.I.A. members also neglected to discover the existence of the door in the east wall which led to the Portico and which established the correct location for the center aisle and Speaker's platform. The drawings for the 1934 restoration of the House platforms were prepared by the A.I.A. chapter under the guidance of Horace Wells Sellers. This design was found to be totally inaccurate by the N.P.S. restoration team in 1961 because it didn't accommodate enough seats and the center aisle was too far south.

d. Summary of Pertinent Historical Data:

In summary, there are numerous clues to the design of the House seating during its stay in Congress Hall. The architectural characteristics of the room itself are well established. The location of columns, doors and heating stoves all would have had an impact on the design of the House seating plan. There are fairly specific parameters concerning the width of each desk, its

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<sup>50</sup>Philadelphia Press, September 29, 1913. Clipping in Sellers Papers, American Philosophical Society.

height and the spacing between each row of desks. The numbers of desks required before and after 1793 are known and provide key elements of the design for each period.

## Chapter 3

### Architectural Analysis of the Van Cortlandt Drawing

#### a. Strategy for Analysis:

When viewed as an isolated document, the Van Cortlandt drawing does not appear to provide sufficient graphic information from which to comfortably recreate an architectural plan for the House seating. The drawing is not drawn to scale and there are no clear references to the interior architectural features of Congress Hall. There is little apparent consistency in the grouping and spacing of the names behind the various segments of desks. However, the evidence that Van Cortlandt constructed the drawing in pencil before inking in the names and desks suggests that the document may contain subtle graphic information which could help to guide a reconstruction of the House Chamber.<sup>52</sup> One effective way to distill out these subtle clues is to attempt to lay out a viable floor plan for the House Chamber, combining information from all of the available sources. If the Van Cortlandt drawing contains any reliable architectural information, then it should provide additional useful clues which corroborate and expand the body of historical evidence.

#### a.1. Graphic Analysis:

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<sup>52</sup>Associate Museum Curator Karie Diethorn examined the original drawing and noticed that Van Cortlandt had laid out the plan with a pencil before inking in the names and desks. See 1992 Furnishing Plan, Supplement 1, pp. 4-6.

In examining the sketch, it is important to recognize what Van Cortlandt actually drew (See Illustration # 10). In his drawing, Van Cortlandt depicted the House members seated in a broad U-shaped plan around the platform for the Speaker. There are dark ink lines which appear to represent the desks. Perpendicular to these lines are the names of the Representatives. In some areas, these names are regularly spaced, while in other areas there are spaces between the names. When examining a clear photograph of the drawing, it is evident that Van Cortlandt used a pencil to sketch in a grid for the names. He then added the members' names and the heavy lines in ink. There are consistent gaps in the ink lines which presumably represent either aisles or some other type of space between segments of the desks. At the front of one of the side aisles, Van Cortlandt appears to have inadvertently drawn the ink line across the aisle's opening. The fact that he then scribbled out this line shows that he intended to leave the aisle open.

It is valuable to recognize as well that Van Cortlandt neglected to draw this scene with any architectural definition. He did not draw the outer railing or bar. He did not show the steps up the platforms or the members' chairs. Other than a single inked line, he did not fully represent the desks, and finally, he did not include the large wood columns of the chamber, one of which stood somewhere within the group of straight desks to the north of the Speaker's platform.

Another thought-provoking aspect of Van Cortlandt's drawing

is the irregularity in the grouping of the members' names. Some sections of the plan show the names grouped in an orderly grid. Other sections contain irregular spacings of names and many gaps. One might assume that the House's overall seating plan was symmetrical and that each separate row of seats was of the same number as the corresponding row across the center aisle. This is not the case in Van Cortlandt's drawing. Some of the discrepancy can be explained by the fact that six members' names are absent from the plan and the omission of their names has left gaps in the rows.<sup>53</sup> As will be discussed below, these missing names can be fit neatly into gaps in the two large sections of desks with curving rows. There remains, however, a lack of symmetry between the two sets of straight desks at the bottom of the drawing, a condition which is more challenging to explain.

a.2. Diagrammatic Representation of the Van Cortlandt Drawing:

The basic information contained in the drawing has been drawn in Illustration # 11. A heavy line shows the location of the desks, aisle are dotted in where Van Cortlandt indicated and a capsule-shaped symbol has been drawn to represent the name of each present member. For reference, the blocks of names have been labelled Section A to Section D, indicating the sections of seats separated by the three aisles. Each section contains a front, middle and outer row of seats.

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<sup>53</sup>See the 1992 Furnishing Plan, Supplement 1 for a discussion of the missing members.

The next step in the analysis was an attempt to logically discern which of the numerous spaces between members' names represented the seats of the six missing members. There appear to be 15-20 gaps in the names, however there are only six members missing. Most of the gaps must therefore reflect the imprecision with which the plan was drawn. The author assumed that the overall seating plan would have been more or less symmetrical on either side of the central aisle. A simple count of the names behind each segment of desks revealed that the only sections of the plan which contain symmetrical numbers of names are the first two rows of Section B and Section C. Even though there are some gaps in these rows, it is proposed by the author that all of their seats are full. It logically follows that the outer rows of these two sections should also contain equal numbers of names.

The outer rows of Sections B and C are each broken into a curved segment and a short straight segment by a gap in the dark line. There are nine names present in the outer curved segment of Section C, but only six in the corresponding curved outer segment of Section B. Therefore three of the members are probably missing from the curving outer segment of Section B. These place are marked on Illustration # 11 by a hexagonal symbol. The other three missing members were probably located behind the short straight segments of desks in the outer rows adjacent to the center aisle. A count of names requires that one of these three members be located in the short straight segment of Section C. The other two names were placed on the same short segments of

Sections B and C because of the obvious gaps left in the otherwise regular groups of names.

The two section of straight desks, Sections A and D, while being more neatly drawn, are in fact much more irregular in number than the sections with the curved desks. The names in these sections were written into regular grids of boxes drawn in pencil. The regularity of these grids belies the fact that there is distinct asymmetry between the two sections. Section D contains three rows of seven names each. Section A contains eight names evenly spaced across the front row, seven names on the second row with a possible empty seat and the back row contains only five names, irregularly spaced. When some of the important architectural features of the room, such as heating stoves and wood columns, are located on Illustration # 11, it appears that the irregularity of Sections A and D could have been caused by conflicts with features in the building.

b. Review of Pertinent Historical Data:

A considerable amount of information about Congress Hall and the House Chamber has been gleaned from primary sources of the late 18th-century. The following paragraphs will summarize the pertinent pieces of information which have bearing on the design of the seating plan.

b.1. Written Descriptions:

There are numerous written descriptions of the House Chamber

surviving from the Federal period. All of these descriptions of the room describe the arrangement of the desks as being curved, semi-circular or semi-elliptical. This fact deserves some discussion, since a major distinction of the Van Cortlandt drawing is its inclusion of straight desks in a U-shaped plan. While none of the 19th-century references mention straight desks, the inclusion of some sections of straight desks could give an elliptical appearance to a plan which otherwise contained regular curves. That may explain why some of the viewers described the plan as oval or semielliptical. If the Van Cortlandt drawing accurately portrays a U-shaped plan with straight and curved desks, then the written descriptions must be viewed as terse generalizations which reflect the viewers' overall impression of the plan. It is the aim of this report to establish the validity of Van Cortlandt's U-shaped plan.

It is possible to detect a certain level of inaccuracy in some of the written descriptions. For instance, the descriptions of the House Chamber contained in Chapter 2, from Henry Wansey and Theophilus Bradbury, each contain numerous details and are generally credited as portraying clear depictions of the room. However, both accounts contain generalities and inaccuracies. For example, Bradbury stated that the desks were "...in the form of a semi-circle."<sup>54</sup> While describing other features of the room, he said that "...At the south end, without the bar, there is an area

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<sup>54</sup>Letter from Theophilus Bradbury to Harriet Bradbury, December 26, 1795. Reprinted in Pennsylvania Magazine of History and Biography 8 (1884):226.

or half circle with three large windows,"<sup>55</sup> obviously a reference to the southern octagonal bay, a feature which survives, more or less intact from the 18th-century. There is no curvature to any part of the bay other than the arched windows. It is quite plausible that Bradbury was equally imprecise in his description of the seating plan.

Likewise, Henry Wansey presented a clearly worded description of the House Chamber, carefully documenting many of the room's features. However, he claimed that there was a "...circular writing desk to each of the circular seats."<sup>56</sup> Many of the original members' chairs have survived and are not at all circular. Again, it appears that the description was written with some degree of generality. The inexactness of these descriptions argue for some degree of caution in appreciating the other references attesting to the desks' shape in plan.

It could be argued that Van Cortlandt's drawing is the only piece of evidence out of many that shows the U-shaped plan and should therefore be discounted. However, while the written descriptions all tersely characterize the shape of the seating as a semi-circle or semi-ellipse, Van Cortlandt's drawing is the only graphically descriptive piece of evidence focusing more or less solely on the seating plan. It should therefore be treated as a strong piece of evidence that brings further clarity and

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<sup>55</sup>Ibid.

<sup>56</sup>David John Jeremy, ed., Henry Wansey and His American Journal, 1794 (Philadelphia, PA: American Philosophical Society, 1970), p.96.

definition to the curved grouping suggested by the written records and not viewed as standing in lone opposition.

b.2. Dimensions of Desks and Platforms:

Van Cortlandt's drawing does not give any indication of the actual size of any of the features represented. There are, however, several sources of information from which to assemble a plausible specification for the seating. Miers Fisher's drawing of September, 1790, showing a scheme for housing the House of Representatives in the new City Hall building, provides a range of dimensions for the seats. As discussed in Chapter 2, Fisher stated that "...2f. are allowed for each Chair whereas 20 inches is sufficient."<sup>57</sup> The surviving Congress Hall chairs in the park's collection measure approximately twenty-four inches across the width of the seat.

In addition to the width of each seat, Fisher provided guidance for the size of other elements as well. "A passage 3f between the Desks from the North Door to the Chair- A passage of 3f. 3In. between each Row of Desks for the Members to sit & pass round each other without disturbance."<sup>58</sup> These dimensions should be considered minimum tolerances since it was finally decided to house Congress in the new county court house, a building which could be more readily expanded.

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<sup>57</sup>"Plan of the City Hall of Philadelphia" [September 1790], Miers Fisher Papers, Historical Society of Pennsylvania.

<sup>58</sup>Ibid.

c. Synthesis of Evidence:

In order to test the validity of the information contained in the Van Cortlandt drawing, the author attempted to construct an architectural plan of the House seating by assembling all of the known evidence. During this exercise, the author looked to the Van Cortlandt drawing for subtle guidance in the disposition of straight and curved desks and for the appropriate number of seats in each continuous segment of desks.

c.1. Reconstructing the House Chamber of 1790-1793:

Beginning with the floor plan of Congress Hall as it existed from 1790-1793, the author attempted to lay out a seating plan that would have accommodated the appropriate number of members and would reflect all of the known evidence. No documentation has been found to confirm that the Speaker's dais was originally in the south bay, however, that feature's location and the corresponding orientation of the seating were extrapolated from the Miers Fisher plan for City Hall and from descriptions of the Federal Hall House Chamber. In laying out the rows of desks, a dimension of 24"-26" was assumed to be necessary for the width of an individual desk. The desks should be approximately 14" in depth and at least 3'-3" was necessary for clearance between rows and behind the last row. Similar standards were used in the design of the seating which was installed in 1961.

Taking a cue from the theory put forth by Diethorn and

Bacon,<sup>59</sup> it was believed that Section B and Section C of the Van Cortlandt drawing were in fact the reused halves of the 1790-1793 seating plan. The author then attempted to construct a similar arrangement in the building, reflecting the general form and disposition of seats shown in Sections B and C. The most challenging aspect of laying out a plan for the 1790-1793 period is the accommodation of the four structural columns which then stood in the room. As can be seen in Illustration #12, it was found that the southern pair of columns would have been least obtrusive if north-south rows of desk were placed in line the them. When arranged this way, the columns do not hamper the movement of the members to their seats and there are no desks directly behind a column. If this premise is accepted, then the location of the columns established the placement of a row of desks and also provides a logical point at which to separate the straight desks from the curved section. By positioning a row of desks in line with the columns, only two rows of straight desks are possible because a third outer row would leave no clearance around the iron heating stoves located in the southern pair of fireplaces.

The curved sections of desks were generated by drawing three concentric rows of desks using the same spacing as was used with the straight sections. When the center point is carefully manipulated, it is possible to produce a plan where the first row contains four desks of 24", the second row contains seven desks

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<sup>59</sup>1992 Furnishing Plan, Supplement 1, pp. 10-11.

of 26" and the outer contains ten desks of 27" or eleven desks of 24.5". When a block of these desks is positioned next to the straight desks, it fits neatly within the space bounded by the northern columns, however the last desk on the outer row must be omitted to leave clearance at the southern fireplaces. This missing desk appears to correspond to the gap in Van Cortlandt's drawing in the outer row of Sections B and C, providing an important link between the 1790 seating plan and the 1793 plan.

Using the basic plan generated by this straightforward process, the seating plan can be further developed by filling in the appropriate number of desks for the 1790-1793 period, arranged with a central north-south aisle with room at the south end for a passage to the doors. As can be seen in Illustration # 13, there are sixty-six desks provided in this plan. The desks are arranged snugly around the columns and there is ample space on the floor in front of the Speaker's platform for the secretaries' desks.

#### c.2. Reconstructing the House Chamber of 1793-1800:

When the Third Congress convened in December of 1793, the House of Representatives required 105 desks. As was discussed above, there is strong evidence that while the House Chamber was almost doubled in size and capacity, the desks and chairs were reused and augmented, although in a different arrangement. Payment for the new desks was limited to eighty feet of new mahogany desks. Assuming this to be a precise measurement, this

figure could represent forty new desks of 24" each. It is more likely that there were only thirty-nine new desks purchased, measuring slightly over 24-1/2". That would have provided exactly the right number of seats for the House from 1793 until 1800.

As Diethorn and Bacon surmised,<sup>60</sup> the fact that so few desks were purchased in 1793 provides strong evidence that the desks from 1790 were retained and reused, although in an enlarged arrangement. Given the modular quality of the design of the seating as proposed above for the 1790-1793 period, it is very simple to rearrange the furniture in such a way that it conforms to Van Cortlandt's depiction.

The two major features of the House Chamber after its enlargement were the disappearance of the southern columns and the reorientation of the seating group to face the west wall. The desks from 1790 were repositioned on either side of the new east-west center aisle. The group of desks east of the 1790 center aisle were moved slightly west, allowing space for a full outer row along the east wall. The group of desks west of the 1790 center aisle were rotated and relocated to the southeast corner of the newly enlarged chamber.

Some of the desks which sat along the 1790 center aisle were moved into position behind the straight rows of 1790 desks, filling out the outer row. Two new groups of straight desks, Sections A and D, were then positioned running from the ends of the curved desks toward the west wall. When this was done, it

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<sup>60</sup>Ibid.

became apparent why there were different numbers of desks in Sections A and D. As can be seen in Illustration # 14, there were open iron stoves located on the west wall which required some degree of clearance. These stoves limited the number of desks in each row to seven across, except in the first two rows immediately north of the Speaker's platform. The peculiar number of seats in the northernmost row of straight desks can be explained by the location of one of the surviving structural columns, a feature which had to be accommodated and which interrupted the outer row of desks. When these features are factored into the architectural requirements of the room and the disposition of desks represented by Van Cortlandt can be accounted for.

In summary, while Van Cortlandt's drawing does not in itself provide sufficiently accurate architectural information from which to recreate the seating plan, it does provide a vital key to guide a careful interpretation of all of the available evidence. Van Cortlandt's suggestion that there were many straight sections of desks provided a very useful strategy from which to approach an architectural design of the room. When this strategy was implemented, Van Cortlandt's drawing offered other subtle clues which seem to confirm the validity of the drawing's architectural evidence.

Appendix I:  
Design of the United States Capitol

A few early design studies for the United States Capitol were found to include seating plans for the House of Representatives that closely resemble the House seating as portrayed in the Van Cortlandt Drawing.

The competition for the design of the national Capitol building, held in 1792 while the Federal Government met in Philadelphia, produced a number of architectural drawings. Many of these drawings are whimsical at best, drawn by builders or amateur architects. Very few of the designers portrayed any type of interior seating. However, a series of drawings by Stephen Hallet survive and show the efforts of a trained architect in the design of a suitable Capitol. At least two of his drawings include fully developed seating arrangements for the House and Senate Chambers. The character of Hallet's seating designs bears a strong resemblance to the Congress Hall seating as portrayed by Philip Van Cortlandt. It is likely that Hallet saw the interior of the Congress Hall House Chamber since the competition was judged in Philadelphia. As early as 1791 he had proposed a design for a Federal Capitol to Thomas Jefferson when they were both in Philadelphia.<sup>1</sup> This was a grand tripartite scheme with a dome at its center and was dubbed his "fancy piece" by the Federal City

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<sup>1</sup>An elevation of this scheme is shown in "Stephen Hallet's Designs for the United States Capitol" by Pamela Scott, Winterthur Portfolio 27:2/3, p. 147.

commissioners who deemed it too extravagant.<sup>2</sup>

Hallet's entry in the Capitol competition of 1792 was a very different design from his earlier scheme. It was a more modest design in the form of a peripteral temple. On its ground floor were the chambers for the House and Senate, each shown with a seating plan. In the House Chamber, the seating was arranged in a rectilinear horseshoe with slightly rounded corners (See Illustration # 15). This design did not win the competition but Hallet was invited by the commissioners to refine his plans.<sup>3</sup> His revised plan of October 1792 showed a U-shaped seating plan for the House of Representatives, remarkably similar to Van Cortlandt's plan (See Illustration # 16). Dr. William Thornton's entry was finally selected as the winning design. Thornton selected an oval form for the plan of the House Chamber, a design that was thoroughly disliked by most of the architects and superintendents eventually involved in its construction. It is unclear whether Thornton included, in his original drawings, any design for the seating in the House Chamber.

In 1804, while attempting to convince President Jefferson to accept a revision to Thornton's oval House Chamber, Benjamin Henry Latrobe devised a plan for the space consisting of a rectangular center with two semi-circular ends. This space was to be covered by a large glazed vault. In a drawing from 1804, Latrobe indicated a seating plan for this redesigned room,

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<sup>2</sup>Ibid, pp. 147-150.

<sup>3</sup>Ibid, pp. 147-150.

including both straight and curved rows of seats separated by numerous aisles (See Illustration # 17). In another drawing, from 1806, Latrobe depicted the principal floor of the entire Capitol and included a different layout for the seating in the House of Representatives (See Illustration # 18). This version closely resembles the Congress Hall plan with a combination of straight and curved desks. In this plan there are also numerous minor aisles cut through the desks.

It is not known whether the seating arrangements of the House Chamber shown in any of these designs for the National Capitol were modelled after the House Chamber in Philadelphia's Congress Hall. However, the repeated use of U-shaped plans with a combination of straight and curved desks indicates that this shape was consistently considered on many occasions and therefore lends credibility to the veracity of Van Cortlandt's drawing. When placed in this context, Van Cortlandt's U-shaped plan does not stand out as an anomalous oddity. To the contrary, it appears to represent a common approach to arranging the seating in a legislative chamber.

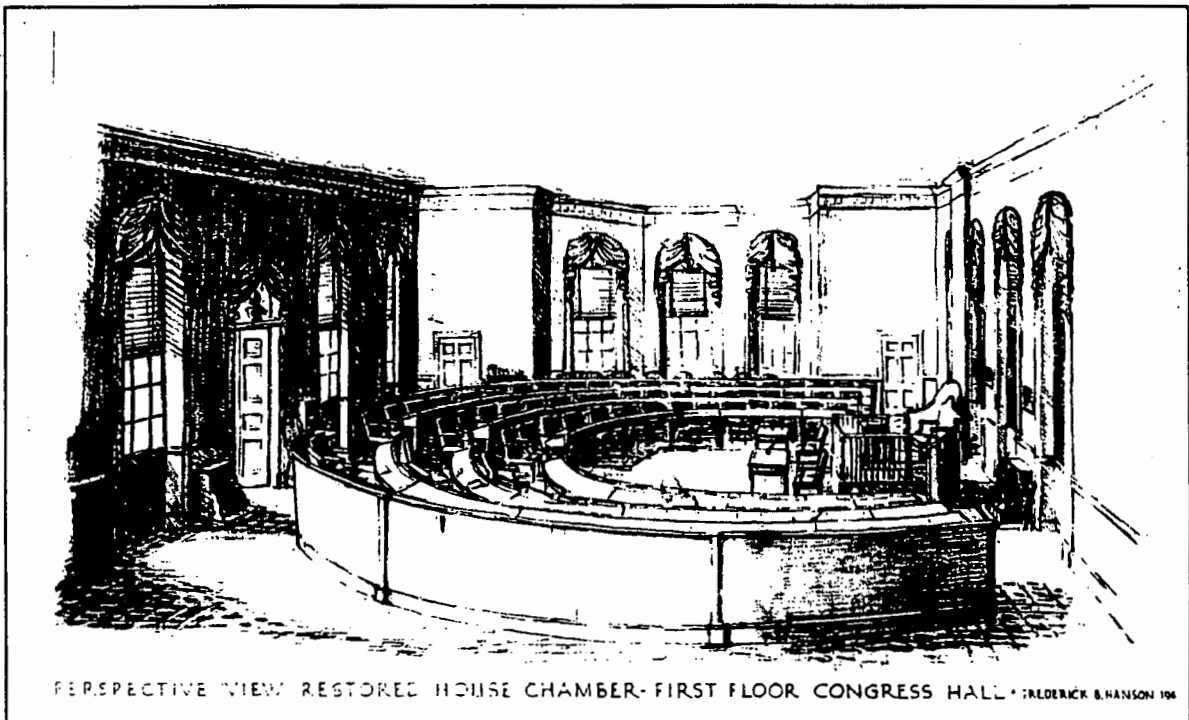
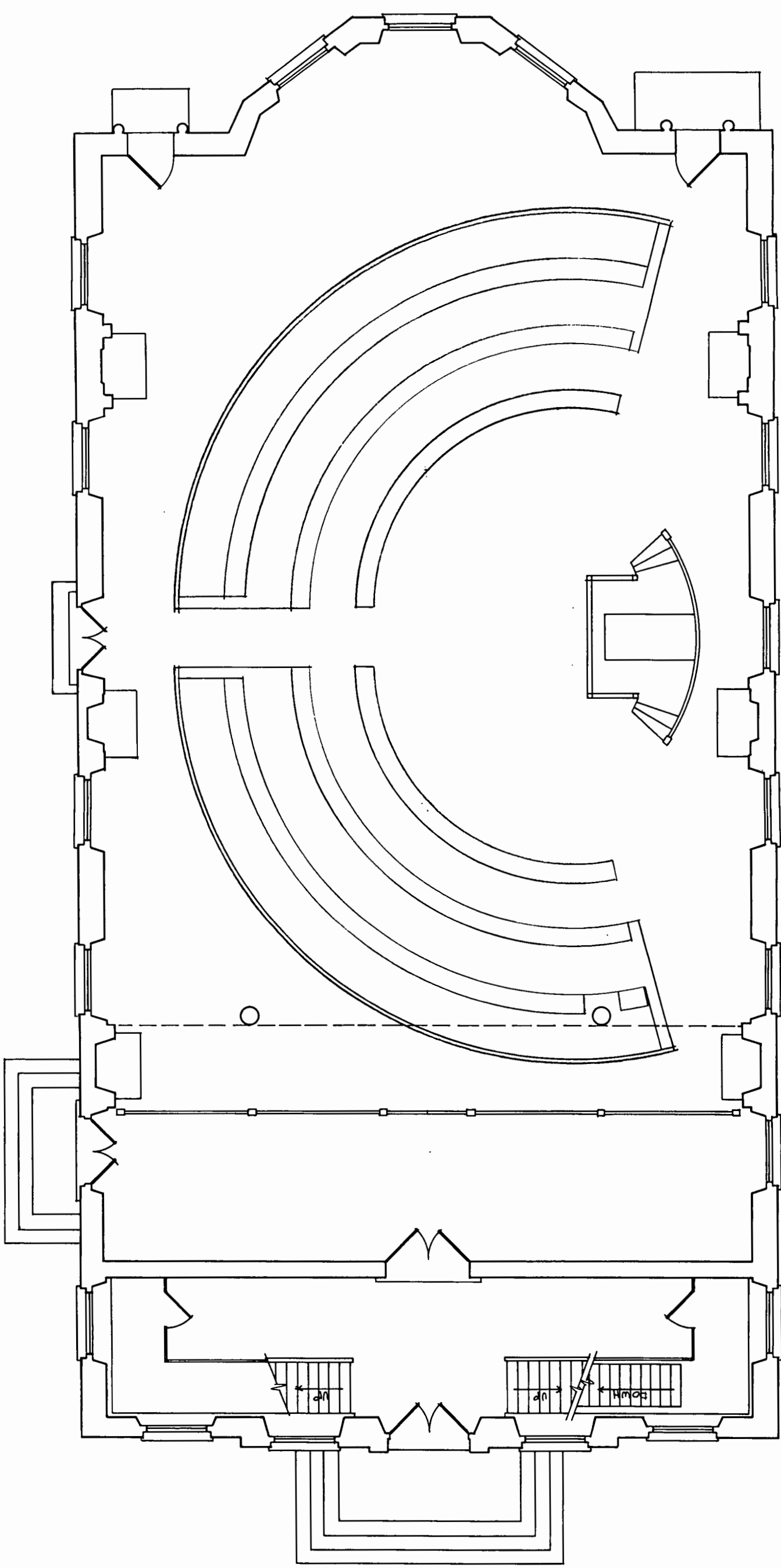


**Illustration # 1:** "Perspective View, Restored House Chamber-First Floor Congress Hall" by Frederick Hanson, 1961.



CONGRESS HALL. PLAN OF 1ST FLOOR  
(AS RESTORED BY N.P.S. IN 1961)



**Illustration # 3:** "Congressional Pugilists...Congress Hall in Philada Feb.15.1798" in William Cobbett, House of Wisdom in a Bustle, 1798. INDE, Catalog #6078.

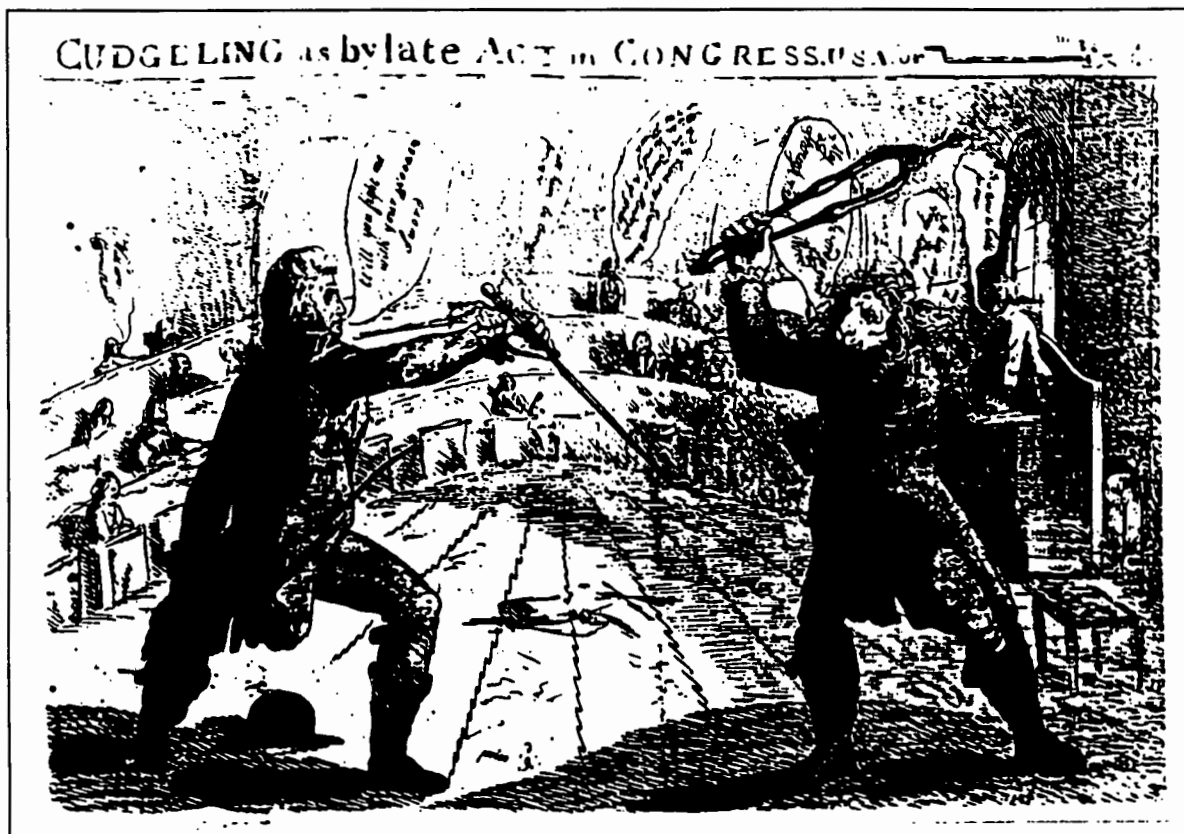
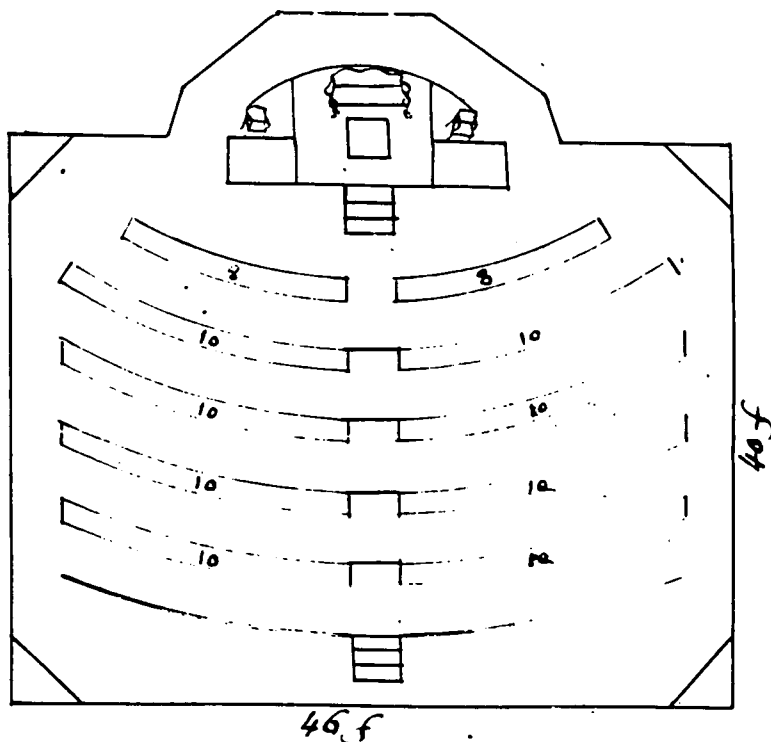


Illustration # 4: "Cudgeling as by late Act in Congress, USA..." 1798.

Plan of the City Hall of Philadelphia as it may be laid out to contain 96 Chairs for the Representation of the United States, or in Case of need by putting the Chairs nearer together 106 - as 2 f. are allowed for each Chair whereas 20 Inches is sufficient.)



NB - A Chimney is proposed for each Corner & sufficient space is left to sit round them

A Passage  $3\frac{1}{2}$  f wide is left on the sides & bet. the Speakers Chair to communicate with the Offices the Philosophical Hall by a Door thro the Middle of Bow -

A Passage is left of 3 f between the Desks, & the North Door to the Chair -

A Passage of 3 f. 3 In. between each Row of 2 for the Members to sit & pass round each other w. out disturbance -

Illustration # 5: "Plan of the City Hall of Philadelphia as it may be laid out...for the Representatives of the United States", 1790. Miers Fisher Papers, Historical Society of Pennsylvania.

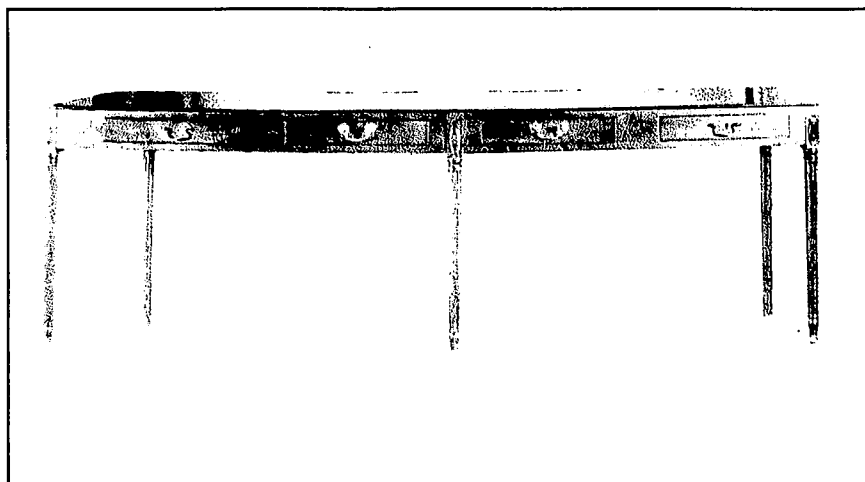
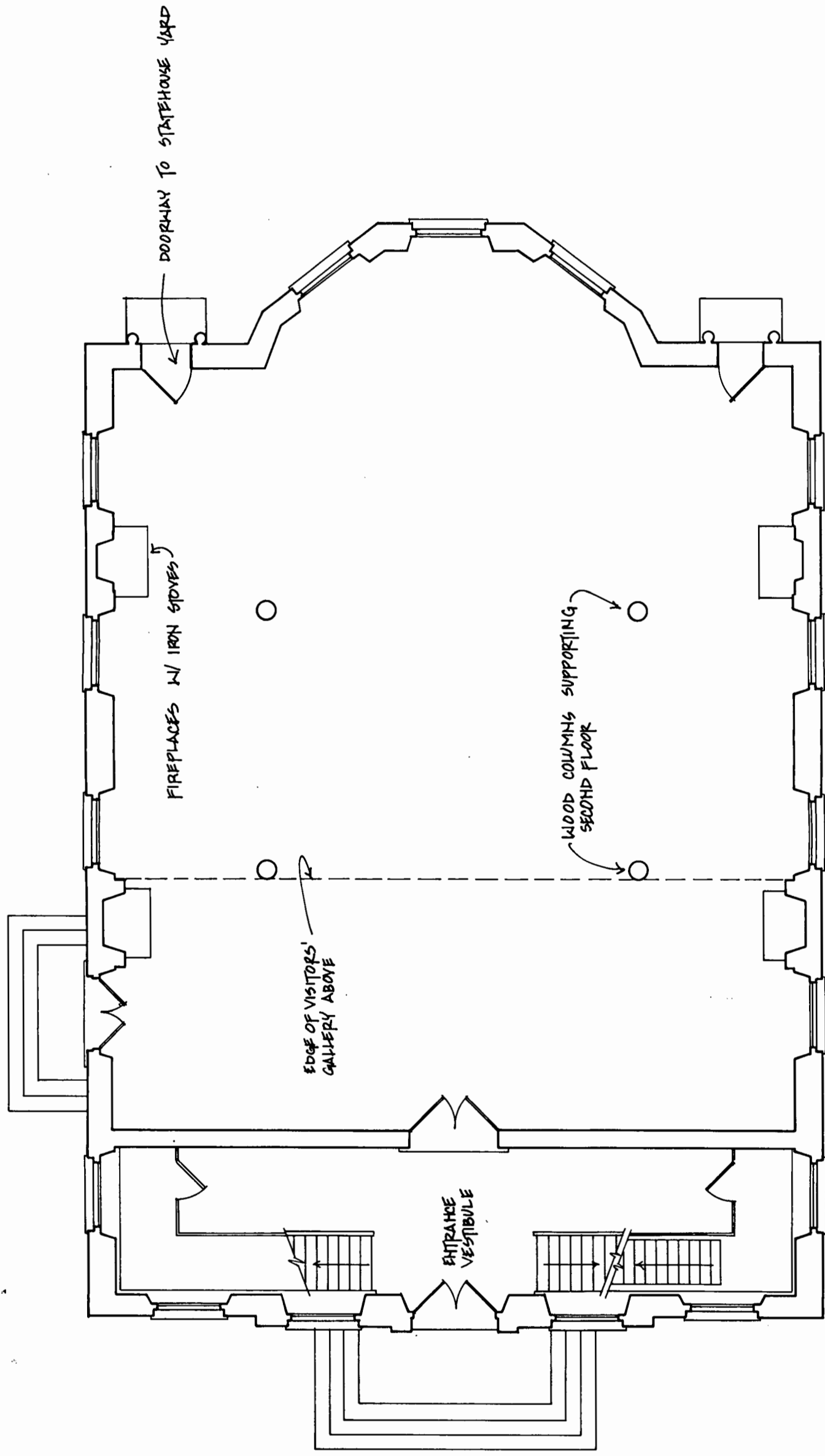
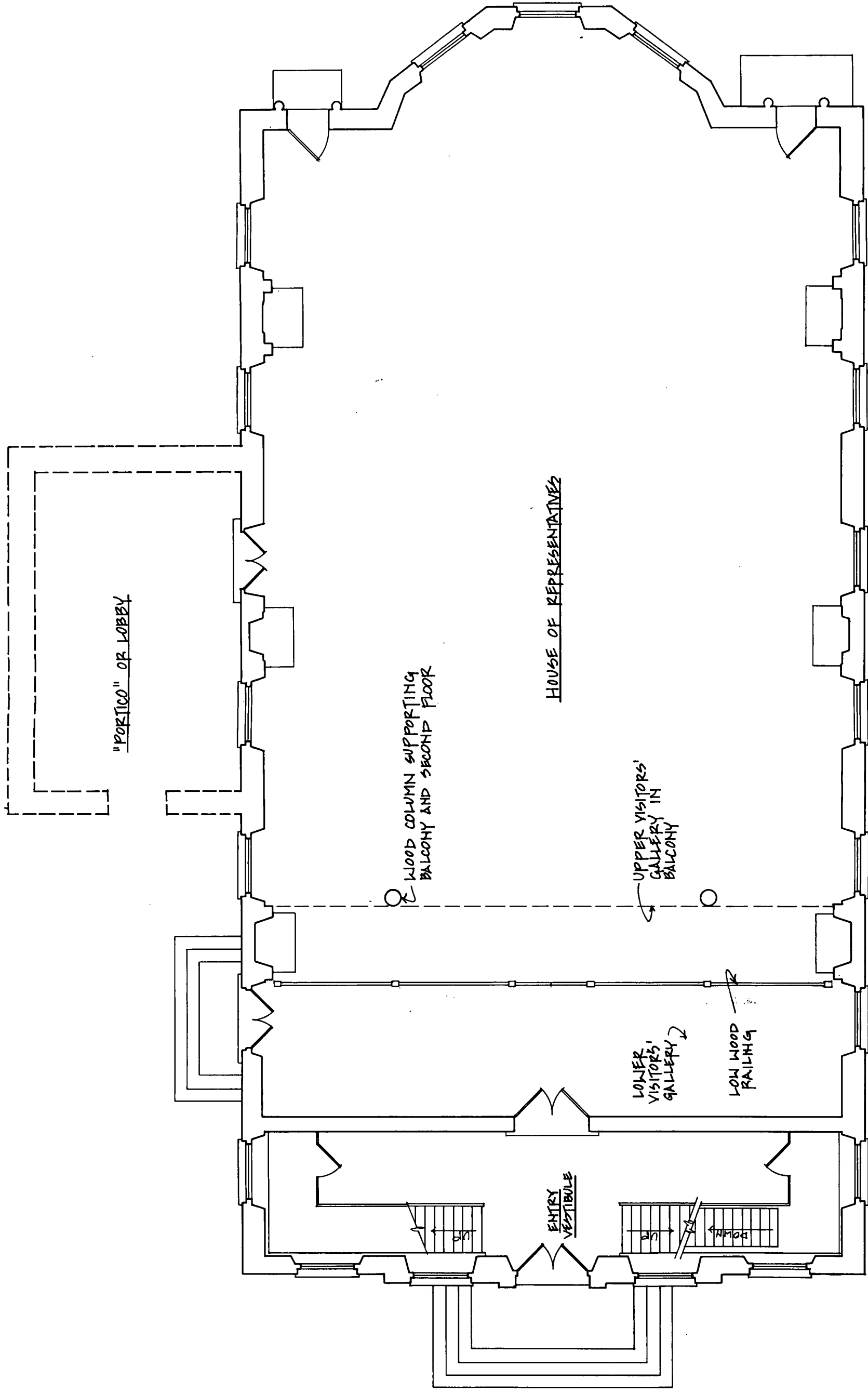


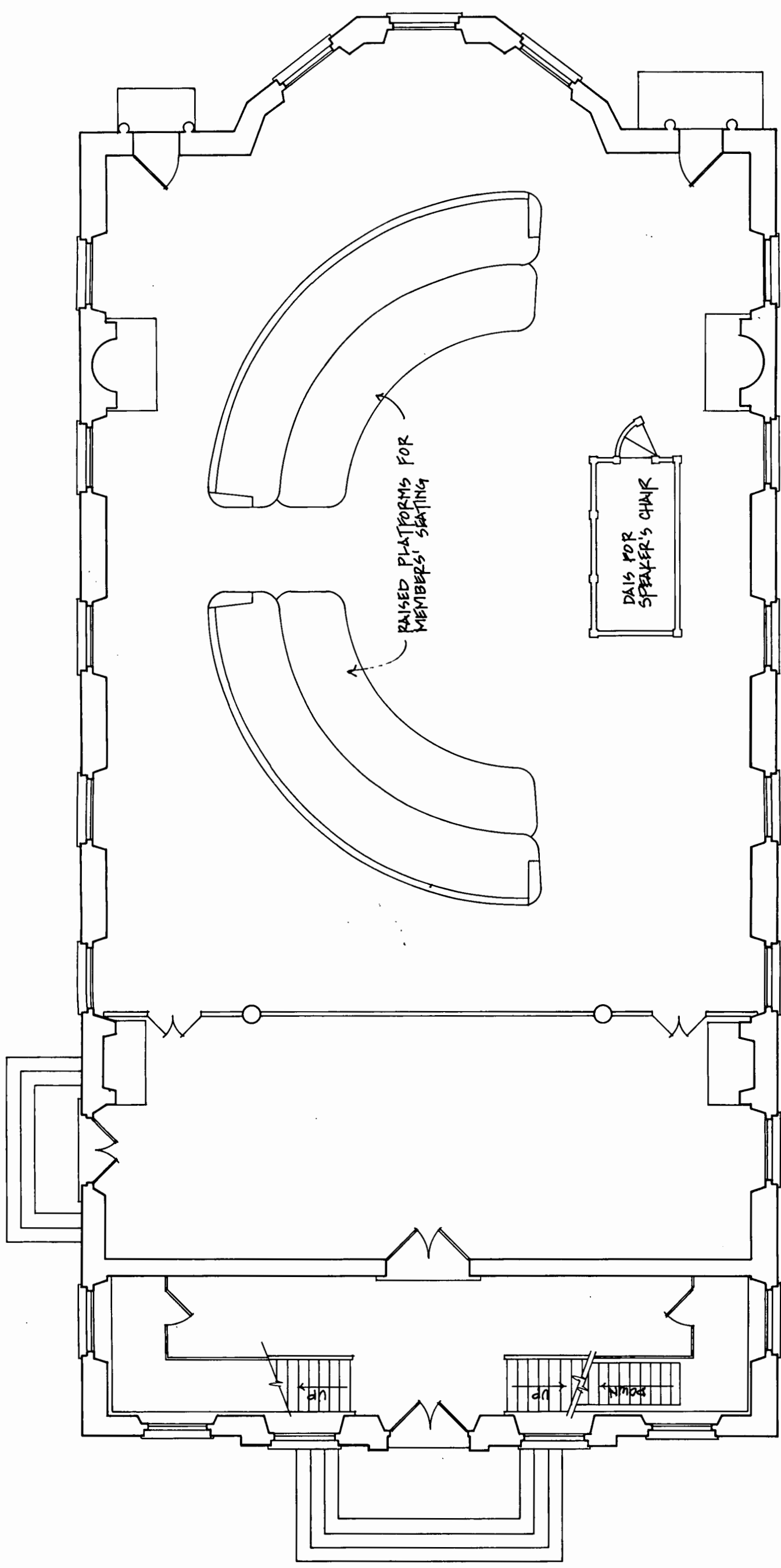
**Illustration # 6:** Photograph of "Long Table",  
used by Congress in Federal Hall in New York  
City, 1789-1790. New York Historical Society.



CONGRESS HALL - PLAN OF 1ST FLOOR 1790-1793



CONGRESS HALL - PLAN OF 1ST FLOOR AFTER 1793

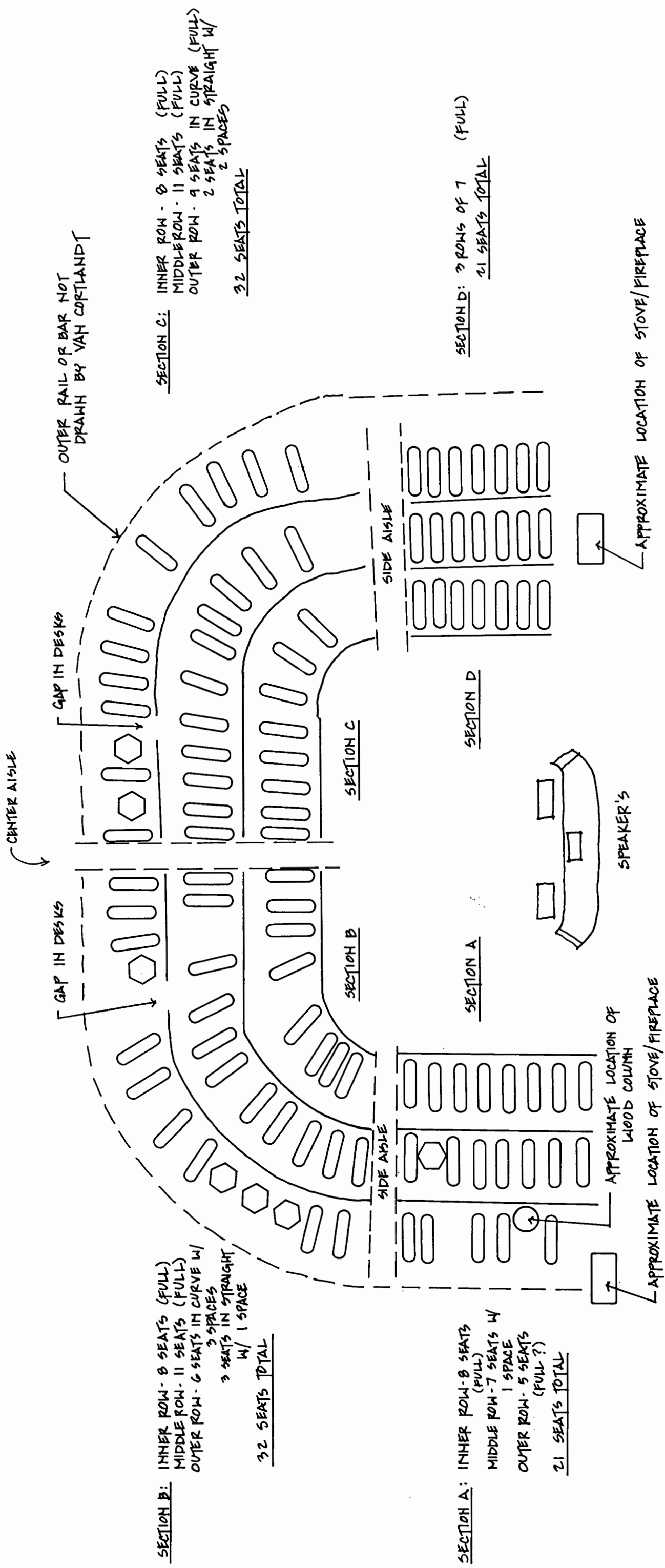


CONGRESS HALL - 1ST FLOOR PLAN IN 1959 SHOWING BUILDING AS RESTORED  
IN 1912. DAIS & SEATING PLATFORMS INSTALLED IN 1934.



TOTAL NUMBER OF HOUSE MEMBERS IN 1790: 100  
 NUMBER OF MEMBERS SHOWN IN DRAWING: 99 SEATED + SPEAKER = 100  
 NUMBER OF ABSENT MEMBERS: 6

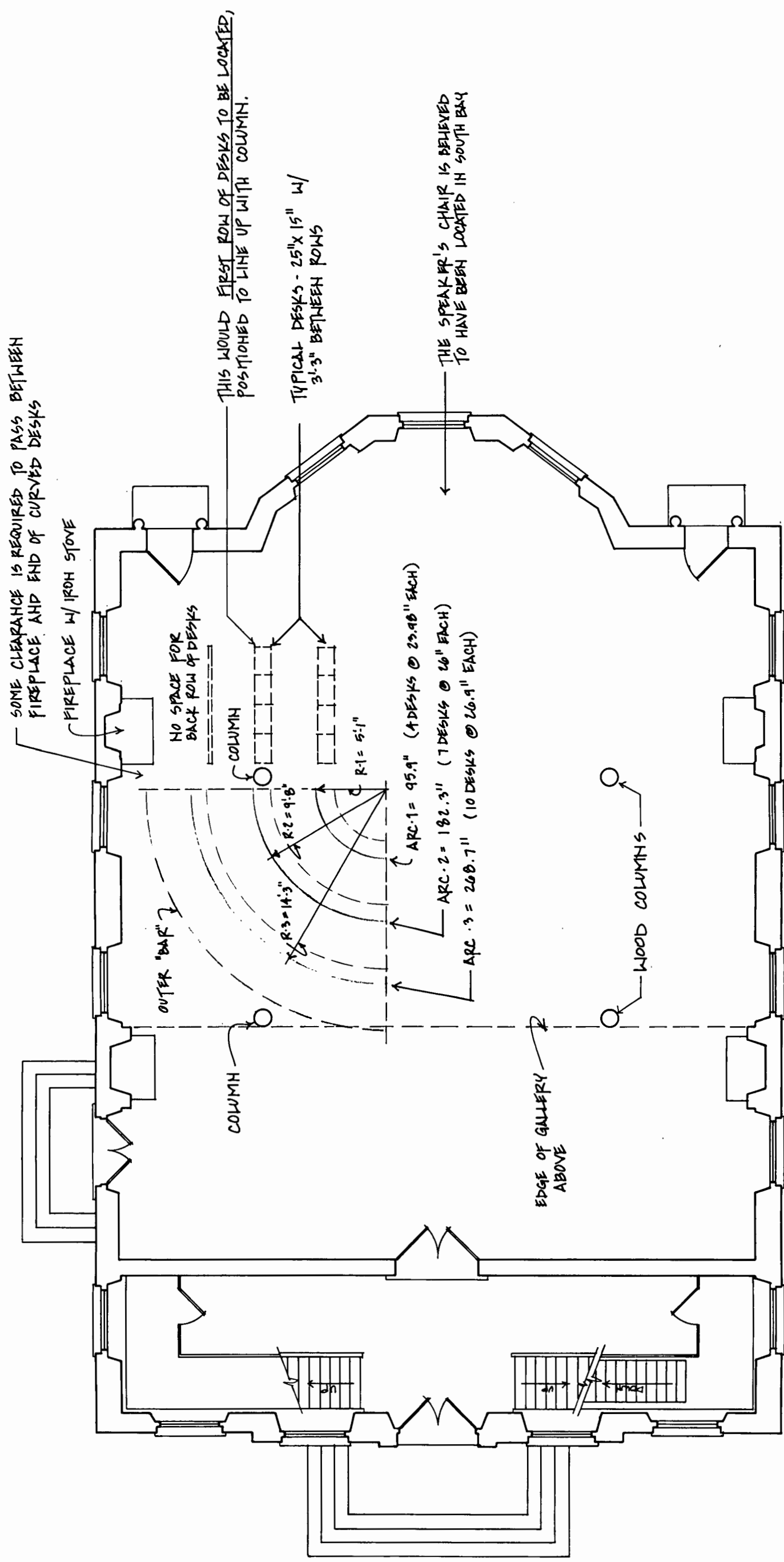
MEMBERS IN FIRST CONGRESS 1789-1791: 65  
 MEMBERS IN SECOND CONGRESS 1791-1793: 67  
 MEMBERS IN THIRD CONGRESS 1793-1795: 105 + 1 DELEGATE



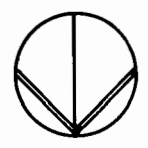
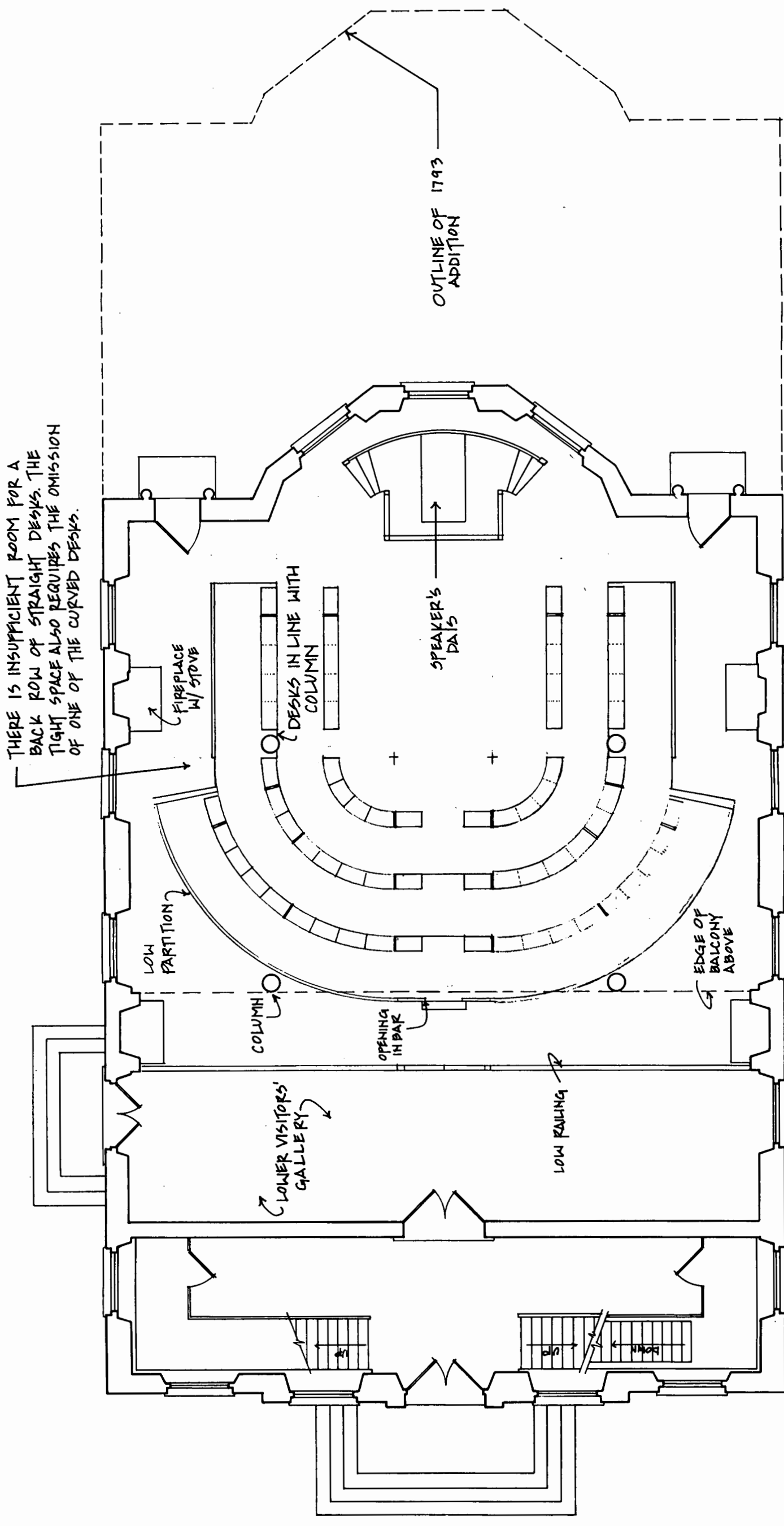
KEY TO SYMBOLS:

- MEMBERS' NAMES AS DRAW
- EMPTY DESKS AS DETERMINED BY AUTHOR
- WOOD COLUMN
- STOVE/FIREPLACE

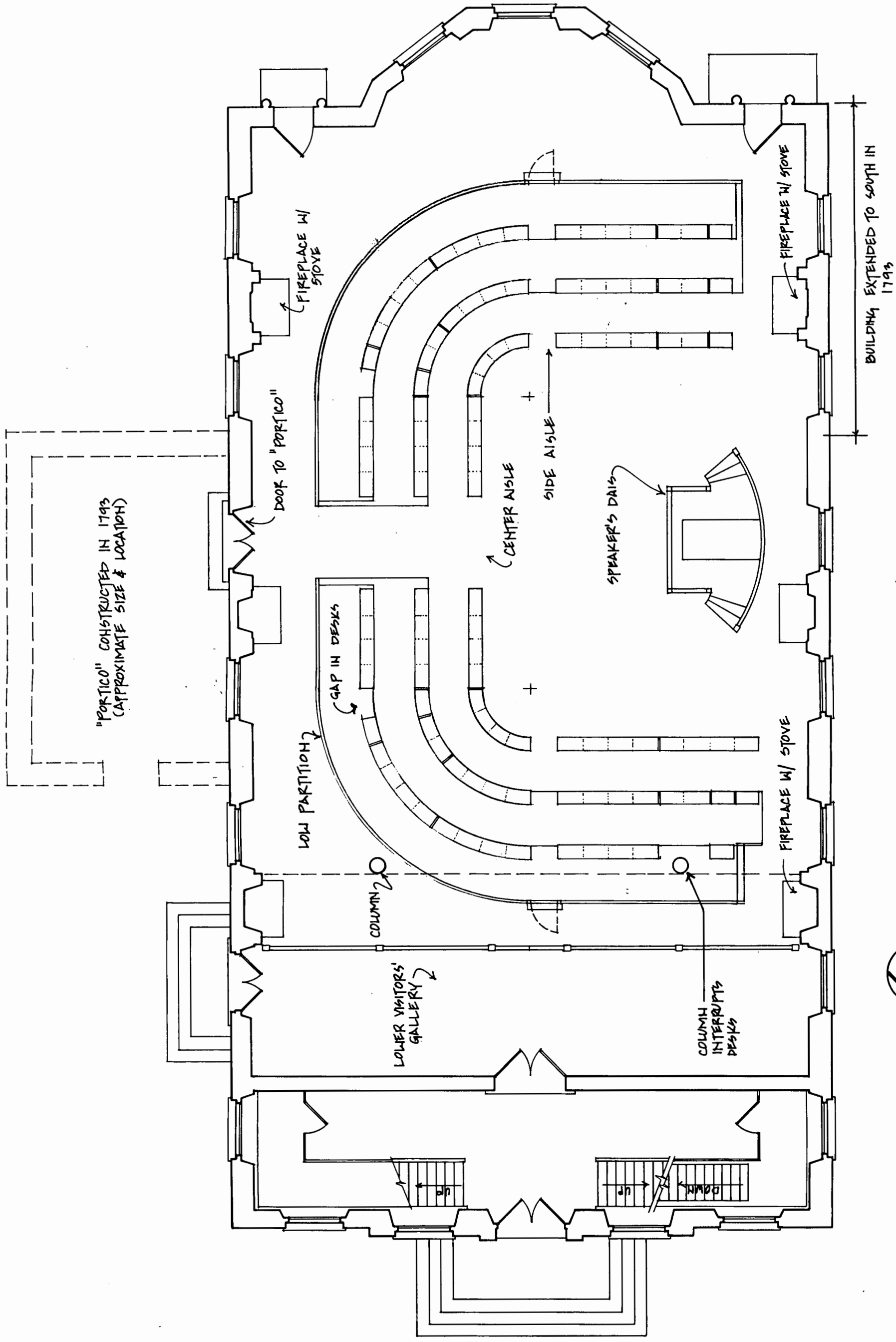
INTERPRETATION OF GRAPHIC EVIDENCE IN  
 VAN CORTLANDT DRAWING (NO SCALE)



LAYING OUT DESKS IN CONGRESS HALL  
(PLAN SHOWS 1790-1793 PERIOD)



CONGRESS HALL · PLAN OF 1<sup>ST</sup> FLOOR 1790-1793  
 PLAN CONTAINS 66 DESKS



CONGRESS HALL. PLAN OF 1ST FLOOR 1793-1800  
PLAN CONTAINS 106 DESKS.



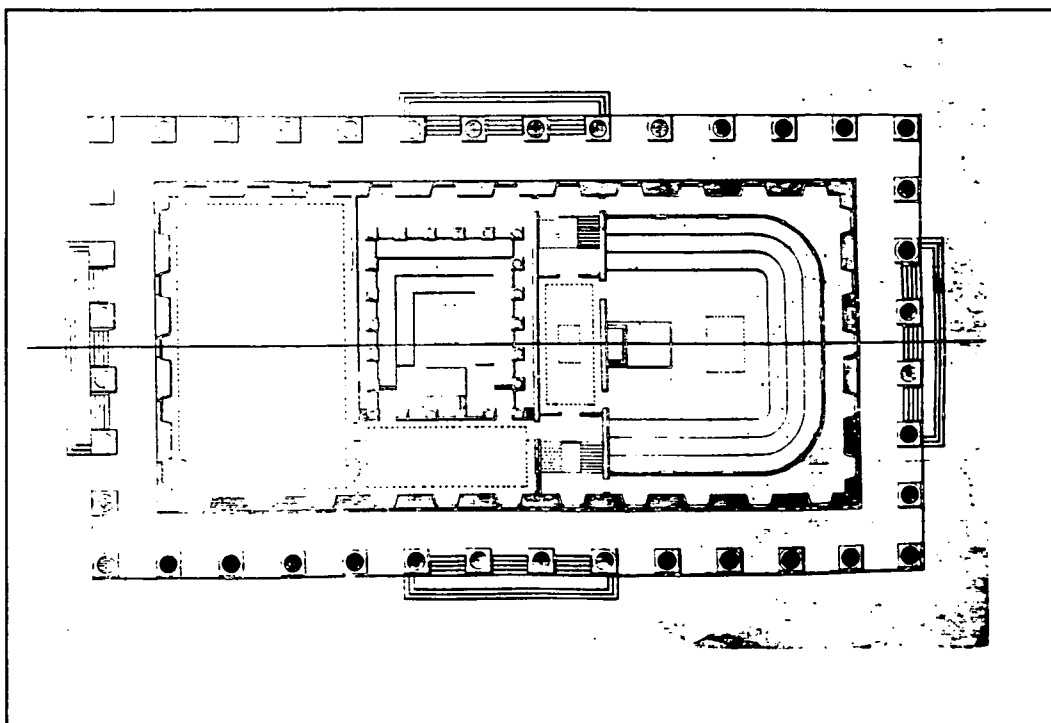


**Illustration # 15:** Competition entry for the United States Capitol, July 1792, Stephen Hallet. (Library of Congress).

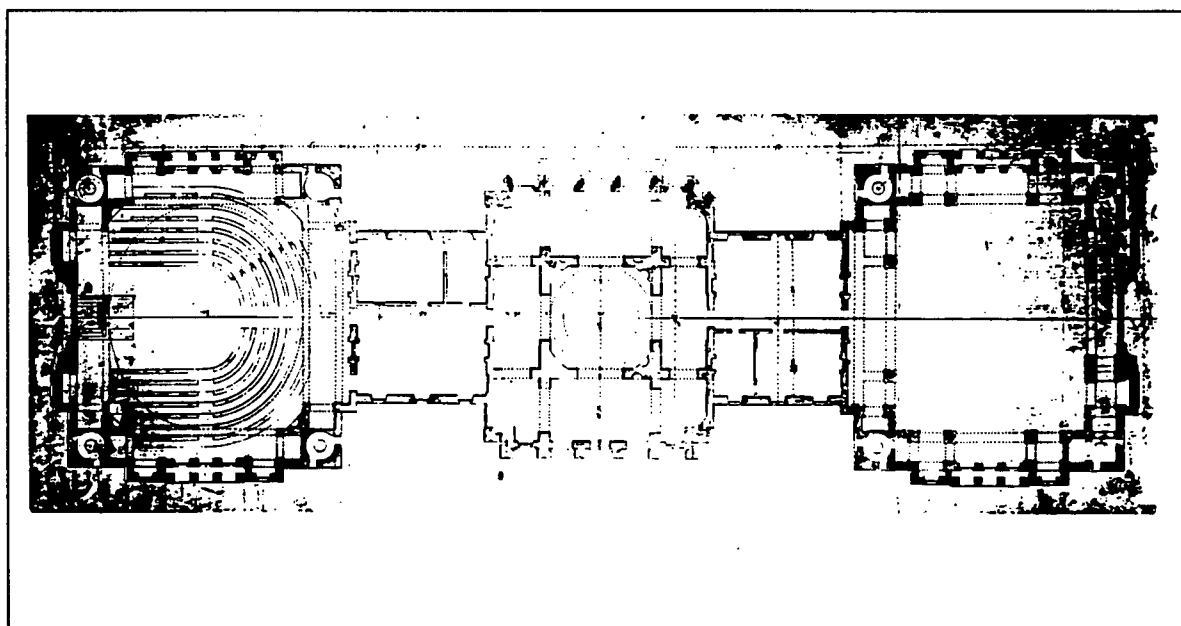


**Illustration # 16:** Design for United States Capitol, October 1792, Stephen Hallet. (Library of Congress).

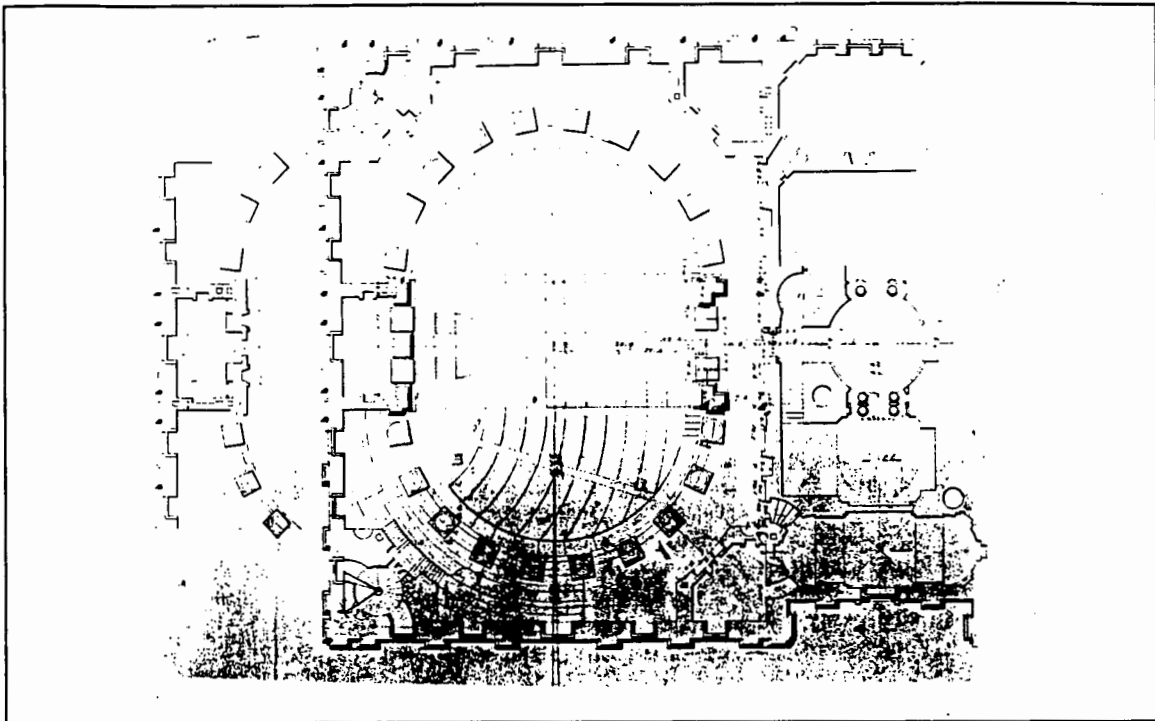


**Illustration # 17:** Plan showing the design of the House of Representatives Chamber in the United States Capitol, 1804, Benjamin Henry Latrobe. (Library of Congress).

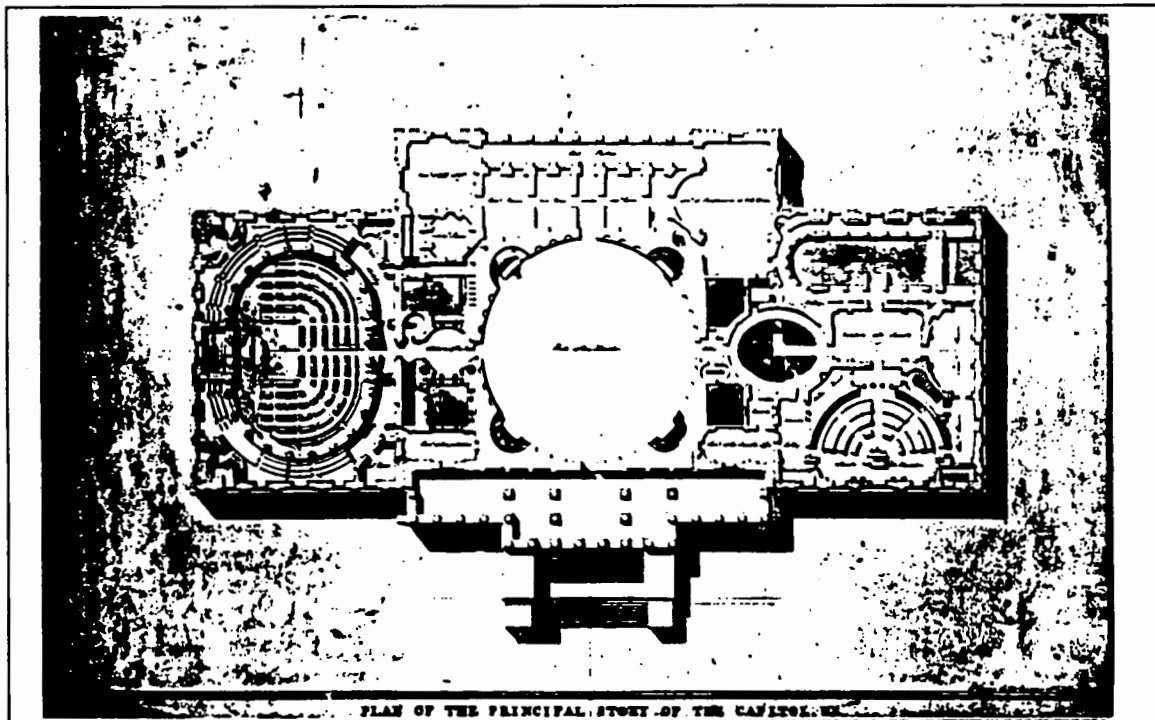


**Illustration # 18:** Principal story of the United States Capitol, 1806, Benjamin Henry Latrobe. (Library of Congress).

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