

**United States Department of the Interior  
National Park Service**

For NPS use only

**National Register of Historic Places  
Inventory—Nomination Form**

received

date entered

See instructions in *How to Complete National Register Forms*

Type all entries—complete applicable sections

**1. Name**

historic Pension Building

and or common Same; also National Building Museum

**2. Location**

street & number 4th, 5th, F & G Streets, N.W. (north side, Judiciary Sq.) not for publication

city, town Washington \_\_\_\_\_ vicinity of

state D.C. code 08 county District of Columbia code 001

**3. Classification**

<b>Category</b>	<b>Ownership</b>	<b>Status</b>	<b>Present Use</b>	
<input type="checkbox"/> district	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/> public	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/> occupied	<input type="checkbox"/> agriculture	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/> museum
<input checked="" type="checkbox"/> building(s)	<input type="checkbox"/> private	<input type="checkbox"/> unoccupied	<input type="checkbox"/> commercial	<input type="checkbox"/> park
<input type="checkbox"/> structure	<input type="checkbox"/> both	<input type="checkbox"/> work in progress	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/> educational	<input type="checkbox"/> private residence
<input type="checkbox"/> site	<b>Public Acquisition</b>	<b>Accessible</b>	<input type="checkbox"/> entertainment	<input type="checkbox"/> religious
<input type="checkbox"/> object	<input type="checkbox"/> in process	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/> yes: restricted	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/> government	<input type="checkbox"/> scientific
	<input type="checkbox"/> being considered	<input type="checkbox"/> yes: unrestricted	<input type="checkbox"/> industrial	<input type="checkbox"/> transportation
		<input type="checkbox"/> no	<input type="checkbox"/> military	<input type="checkbox"/> other:

**4. Owner of Property**

name General Services Administration

street & number 18th and F Street, N.W.

city, town Washington \_\_\_\_\_ vicinity of state D.C.

**5. Location of Legal Description**

courthouse, registry of deeds, etc. Recorder of Deeds

street & number 6th and D Streets, N.W.

city, town Washington, D.C. \_\_\_\_\_ state

**6. Representation in Existing Surveys**

title National Register of Historic Places has this property been determined eligible?  yes  no

date February 20, 1969 \_\_\_\_\_ federal \_\_\_\_\_ state \_\_\_\_\_ county \_\_\_\_\_ local

depository for survey records National Register of Historic Places

city, town 1100 L Street, N.W., Washington \_\_\_\_\_ state D.C.

# 7. Description

<b>Condition</b>		<b>Check one</b>	<b>Check one</b>
<input type="checkbox"/> excellent	<input type="checkbox"/> deteriorated	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/> unaltered	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/> original site
<input checked="" type="checkbox"/> good	<input type="checkbox"/> ruins	<input type="checkbox"/> altered	<input type="checkbox"/> moved    date _____
<input type="checkbox"/> fair	<input type="checkbox"/> unexposed		

**Describe the present and original (if known) physical appearance**

The Pension Building is a stately, red brick building of immense proportions occupying an entire block between 4th, 5th, F and G Streets, N.W., in downtown Washington, D.C. It was designed by Army Quartermaster General Montgomery C. Meigs and was built between 1882 and 1887 to house the U.S. Pension Bureau, a Federal agency brought into being to award pensions to Union veterans of the Civil War. This massive renaissance inspired, three-story building is crowned with gabled clerestory section, which rises an additional three-stories above the floor. Its interior contains a huge, covered central atrium courtyard which rises to the top of the clerestory roof. There are entrances on all 4 sides of the building at street level. The central atrium courtyard contains eight giant 78-foot columns to hold up the clerestory roof and is surrounded by a two-storied arcaded gallery with a ring of offices around the perimeter of the building. The interior space is grand and dramatic. It provides an abundance of light and air and net usable floorspace including the courtyard of 156,360 square feet.

The exterior of the building is composed of three-story walls topped by a gabled clerestory. The walls are self-supporting masonry construction with burnt red brick of running bond. The masonry joints are tinted to match the brick. The lower main block of the exterior is inspired by the Renaissance Pallazzo Farnese in Rome, seen by Meigs on tour in Italy. It is larger than its prototype being 400-feet long by 200-feet wide. The walls are crowned by an elaborate cornice and the 3 floors are demarked by stringcourses of terra cotta and molded brick. Each facade has an entrance in the center defined by a projecting brick archway and stone architrave. The north and south facades have 27 bays, and the east and west facades have 13 bays.

The slightly arched windows are flanked by slender brick pilasters supporting entablatures with straight, curved or triangular pediments of molded brick. The first floor windows are capped off with straight lintels supported by scrolled terra cotta brackets on paneled pilasters. The sills merge with continuous stringcourse at each level. The second floor windows are surrounded by ionic pilasters topped by simple entablatures with alternating curved and triangular pediments. The third floor windows are flanked by corinthian capped pilaster supporting triangular pediments and resting on double consoles within a stringcourse. The corners of the building are embellished on the upper two floors of the central block of the building are embellished on the upper two floors of the central block with full circular brick columns, doric on the second floor and corinthian on the third floor.

## 8. Significance

Period	Areas of Significance—Check and justify below				
prehistoric	archeology-prehistoric	community planning	landscape architecture	religion	
1400-1499	archeology-historic	conservation	law	science	
1500-1599	agriculture	economics	literature	sculpture	
1600-1699	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/> architecture	education	military	social/	
1700-1799	art	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/> engineering	music	humanitarian	
<input checked="" type="checkbox"/> 1800-1899	commerce	exploration settlement	philosophy	theater	
<input checked="" type="checkbox"/> 1900-	communications	industry	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/> politics government	transportation	
		invention		<input checked="" type="checkbox"/> other (specify)	
				Presidential inaugurations	
<b>Specific dates</b>	1882-1885	<b>Builder/Architect</b>	Montgomery C. Meigs		

### Statement of Significance (in one paragraph)

#### A. Architectural Significance

The Pension Building has national architectural significance in that it represents an early revival of the Italian Renaissance style by Montgomery C. Meigs, who used the Palazzo Farnese and the Cancelleria in Rome as his models. Meigs seems to have anticipated a full blown revival of renaissance classicism strongly associated with the architects Mc Kim, Mead, and White, who began the Villard Houses, a brownstone renaissance palazzo in New York City one year after ground was broken for the Pension Building. Until Meigs introduced the Italian Renaissance style, the predominant style of the period was high Victorian Gothic, Second Empire, and Romanesque Revival. The return to renaissance forms was rendered all but obligatory by the Columbian Exposition in 1893 in Chicago. A "great white city" of neo-classical pavilions, it established the formal Beaux Arts approach to design and launched the city beautiful movement across the nation.

For the design of the Pension Building, Meigs relied on his personal observation of Renaissance buildings in Italy, but mainly the Ordini d' Architettura and Letaouilly's Les Edifices de Rome Moderne, both books widely studied in America but not widely realized in buildings until the century's end. Meigs used brick instead of stone in his design.

In 1900, the McMillan Commission considered the Victorian government buildings of Washington including the Pension Building, "a regrettable deviation from the classical precedents of the Founding Fathers."<sup>1</sup> New buildings were to follow examples set by the White House, Treasury, and the Old Patent Office to express the appropriate simplicity, dignity, and power of our government. This approach toward Federal architecture lasted 50 years into this century.

The Pension Building is part of the ensemble of buildings on Judiciary Square. The first city hall was built by George Hadfield in 1820, and became the D.C. Courthouse in 1873. Other buildings followed the example of Hadfield's courthouse. The imposing red brick mass of the Pension Building contrasts with

# 9. Major Bibliographical References

see continuation sheet

# 10. Geographical Data

Acreage of nominated property \_\_\_\_\_

Quadrangle name Washington West, D.C.-Md.-Va.

Quadrangle scale 1:24000

UTM References

A 

1	8	3	2	5	0	0	0	4	3	0	7	1	4	0
Zone		Easting					Northing							

B 

Zone		Easting					Northing							

C 

Zone		Easting					Northing							

D 

Zone		Easting					Northing							

E 

Zone		Easting					Northing							

F 

Zone		Easting					Northing							

G 

Zone		Easting					Northing							

H 

Zone		Easting					Northing							

Verbal boundary description and justification

In northwest Washington, D.C. occupying the entire block of F and G and 5th and 4th Streets, Northwest.

List all states and counties for properties overlapping state or county boundaries

state Washington, D.C. code \_\_\_\_\_ county \_\_\_\_\_ code \_\_\_\_\_

state \_\_\_\_\_ code \_\_\_\_\_ county \_\_\_\_\_ code \_\_\_\_\_

# 11. Form Prepared By

name/title Gary Scott, Regional Historian

organization National Capital Region, National Park Service date \_\_\_\_\_

street & number 1100 Ohio Drive, S.W. telephone (202) 426-6660

city or town Washington City state District of Columbia

# 12. State Historic Preservation Officer Certification

The evaluated significance of this property within the state is:

national  state  local

As the designated State Historic Preservation Officer for the National Historic Preservation Act of 1966 (Public Law 89-665), I hereby nominate this property for inclusion in the National Register and certify that it has been evaluated according to the criteria and procedures set forth by the National Park Service.

State Historic Preservation Officer signature \_\_\_\_\_

title \_\_\_\_\_ date \_\_\_\_\_

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I hereby certify that this property is included in the National Register

date \_\_\_\_\_

Keeper of the National Register

Attest:

date \_\_\_\_\_

Chief of Registration

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The exterior terra cotta detailing is unique and consists of a continuous running frieze between the first and second levels. The frieze is by Casper Buberl a Bohemian born sculptor. It is 3-feet high and composed of a procession of Civil War forces parading around the entire building. The various panels of the frieze depict infantry, cavalry, artillery, and navy units of the Union Army, with Quartermaster and medical units as well. As Quartermaster General of the Army in charge of outfitting units during the Civil War, Meigs directed a large contingent of various units in correct uniform form a parade for the sculptor's benefit, so that every detail of uniform and accoutrement would be correct to the last detail. Each entrance of the building has its theme in the frieze panels above with a gate of the invalids on the north side, a gate of the infantry on the south side, a gate of the quartermaster on the west side, and a gate of the navy on the east side. Above the brick arches are terra cotta bas-relief spandrels and decorative keystones representing classical martial figures. The entrance doors are pairs of double wood doors with glass panel flanked with narrow glass side lights with glass transoms above, except for the east door which has been turned into a loading dock for the building.

The four entrances lead through vestibules into a central roofed courtyard, 116-feet wide and 316-feet long. The courtyard is divided into three sections by two screens of four colossal columns 78-feet high. The columns are constructed of shafts consisting of 55,000 bricks with bases 8-feet in diameter. They are crowned with hugh plaster molded corinthian capitals. In the center of the courtyard is a fountain with a basin 28-feet in diameter and a terra cotta rim. A rectangular galley surrounds the courtyard suggestive of the Chancelleria in Rome. There are 72 terra cotta doric columns on the ground floor of the gallery and 72 cast iron ionic columns on the second floor. There are squared compound brick piers in the corners, and open corridors for office around the perimeter. There is a parapet wall on the third level of the gallery, topped with marble slab coping which originally had terra cotta urns.

Above the gallery there is wrought iron balcony which provides access to rooms on the fourth floor which were devoted to storage. There is a metal track above the balcony supported by an ornate metal wall bracket which surrounds the building above the fourth floor. It was once used to transport documents around the building.

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The courtyard is surmounted by iron trusses and a roof with a clerestory monitor down the spine. The roofing material was originally terra cotta tiles resting on iron purlins and beams. The corrugated metal ceiling installed in 1894 has recently been replaced with pre-cast concrete panels, painted blue and doubling as ceiling.

There is a large clerestory section above the fourth floor consisting of a center section with gabled facades facing north and south above the long exterior facades of the exterior and containing 7 arched windows with semicircular transoms. Two wings jut out from the east and west sides of the center clerestory block each having gabled ends facing east and west above the east and west facades of the exterior of the building. A smaller clerestory monitor rests on the roof line of the 2 wings.

The center section of the clerestory has eleven smaller arched window openings of graduated sizes above the seven arched windows. The east and west walls of the central clerestory bay is punctuated with five arched semicircular niches on the interior echoing larger windows of the north and south wall. Each niche was originally flanked by pilasters. Above the pilasters and niches is a band of 2-foot high niches which held life sized busts.

The lower side clerestory wings are spanned by trusses similar but running perpendicular to those of the central bay. The monitor on the side wings is 32-feet long by 72-feet wide on each side. The window sections of the monitor are embellished with small twisted columns.

The office spaces of the interior leading off from the courtyard gallery are airy and domed, with ceiling 18-feet high on the first floor and 22-feet high on the second floor. The third floor offices have ceilings of shallow brick arches of iron beams at a height of 19-feet. The arched openings of the lower story offices leading to the gallery have been filled with dry wall.

The entrance vestibules into the building have architectural interest. The north and south vestibules are grander with domes and cast iron columns. The side walls have semi-circular niches suitable for large statues. The east and west vestibules are barrel vaulted with dentil moldings, cornices, and semi-circular niches between pairs of pilasters. Three vestibules are paved with terra cotta. The east vestibule is now a concrete service ramp.

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There are four grand stairways to the side of each entrance extending from the first to the third floors. On the north and south sides the two stairways are approximately 24-feet wide. The stairways on the east and west sides are 7-feet about 8-feet wide. A half turn of the stairways on the east and west go up to the fourth floor balcony. All stairs are paved with brick and have 18-inches treads and shallow risers. Some of the landings have plaster models of panels from the exterior military frieze.

The flooring in the courtyard is burnt clay tiles with wood flooring in the offices. There is terrazzo in the vestibules, perimeter corridors on the first floor, and in toilet rooms. There is a descriptive plaque in the first floor arcade at the 5th Street entrance along with a glazed tin typed portrait photo of Lincoln set into the wall in a stone frame. There is a similar photo of Grant on the 4th Street side. A glazed ceramic tile presidential seal is inlaid in the great courtyard floor.

The exterior brick bearing walls are built on rubble stone foundation walls supported on concrete footings. The basement ceiling consists of brick barrel vaulting. The first and second floor domed high ceilings carry their loads to elliptical arches located on all four sides of the rooms. Groin vaults occur in all corner offices of the first and second floor, as well as rooms directly east of the F Street entrance and west of the G Street entrance.

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the Greek inspired classical structures on the other three sides. From the time it was built it was derided as "Meigs old red barn" and criticized for not fitting in with the norm of Washington's white classical architecture. In 1935 a scheme was proposed to remodel the Pension Building to conform with the others, with its brick removed and a new classical facade replacing it with stone. However, the General Accounting Office, then occupant of the building, decided to move out, leaving the Pension Building as one of the few Italian Renaissance structures of its day.

**B. Historical Significance**

The Pension Building was built as a memorial to the soldiers, sailors, and marines of the Civil War. This memorial theme is carried out by the frieze of Civil War soldiers and sailors executed by Casper Buberl. The frieze extends completely around the building. During construction, historic documents including the Official Records of the War of the Rebellion, typographic and Battlefield maps, a facsimile of the Declaration of Independence, and other War and State Department publications were enclosed in metal cases and inserted in several of the great columns to preserve them. First and foremost the building carries national significance in that it represents the Civil War generation's own memorial to the Civil War. It was intended to be a major national memorial.

The Pension Building is nationally significant in that it was built for and occupied by the Pension Bureau, the first Federal veterans agency to operate on a national scale. During the 40 years that the Pension Bureau occupied the building, \$8.3 billion was paid to 2,763,063 veterans (and their wives) of the War of the Revolution, War of 1812, Mexican War, and Civil War. Notable occupants included James Tanner, famed champion of Civil War veterans who lost both feet at the Second Battle of Manassas at 18. In 1889, "Corporal" Tanner was appointed U.S. Commissioner of Pensions, but resigned in the same year after raising pension payments without the approval of his superior, the Secretary of the Interior. He later became Commander in Chief of the Grand Army of the Republic. The Pension Bureau occupied the building from 1885 until 1926, when the General Accounting Office moved



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into the building, remaining until 1950. A variety of Federal agencies and also the D.C. courts occupied the building until 1978 when the Senate Joint Committee passed resolution 160 designated the building for restoration as a national museum of the building arts.

The Pension Building is nationally significant in that it was the scene of several Presidential inaugural balls. Even before the building was completed, the huge central courtyard was the scene of Grover Cleveland's first inaugural ball on March 4, 1885. That year the perimeter walls were standing but the courtyard was open to the sky. A temporary wooden roof was built and electric lights were used. The eight mammoth columns were covered with white cloth and intertwined with a chain of evergreen. Inaugural balls were also held there for Benjamin Harrison (1889), Grover Cleveland (1893), William McKinley (1897 and 1901), Theodore Roosevelt (1905), and William Howard Taft (1909). Purchase of a ticket was said to be all that was required for admission. Crowds grew from 9000 at Cleveland's first to 18,000 at Taft's. Elaborate decorations were constructed for the inaugurations. Festoons of greenery banked the arcades and a huge canopy or broad streamers hid the ceiling of the courtyard. After a long hiatus, Richard Nixon held his inauguration ball in the building again in 1973, followed by Jimmy Carter in 1977, and Ronald Reagan in 1981. At this writing the building is being restored for the 1985 inauguration. The 1889 inauguration hosted William T. Sherman, William F. Cody, and Frederick Douglass, with Victor Herbert and Will Haley providing the music.

**C. Landmark Status**

The Pension Building was bitterly criticized until the 1950s and condemned as "Meigs old red barn" out of character with the marble and limestone classical architecture of Washington. In 1957, the tide began to turn when an AIA exhibit of buildings worthy of preservation included the Pension Building. The AIA architectural guide of Washington cited the Pension Building courtyard as "the most astonishing room in Washington."<sup>2</sup> In 1964, the GSA Historical Study No.1 said "the building has a character of its own -- in a sense a personality which makes for ready recognition whenever its picture appears or its name comes up!"<sup>3</sup> In May 1964, the Joint Committee on Landmarks appointed by

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the National Capital Planning Commission and the Commission of Fine Arts recognized the building as a Category I Landmark "of great historic and aesthetic value, the preservation of which will contribute materially to our cultural heritage."<sup>4</sup> In 1969, the building was listed in the National Register of Historic Places by the National Capital Planning Commission. It was declared nationally significant in the 1980 amendment to the 1966 Historic Preservation Act. In the 1980 Act, Congress slated the building for restoration as the National Building Museum. 5

**D. Technological Significance**

Montgomery C. Meigs was an innovator in 19th century building technology. As supervisor of the Washington Aqueduct project (1857-1862), Meigs directed the construction of the Cabin John Aqueduct, then the largest single span masonry arch in the world, and the Rock Creek Bridge which used cast iron pipe to carry water and carry the bridge structure above. Meigs developed a special crane to erect the cast iron dome of the Capitol. He designed his own fireproof house built around a central courtyard, where he used columns to divide the interior spaces and stairs of brick and mortar.

Meigs was critical of the government buildings of his time with their dark and gloomy central corridors with windows at the ends only, which were often cut off by screens erected by clerks to provide space for extra offices. Meigs' courtyard design of the Pension Building solved the problems of lighting and ventilation. There were no dark corridors and all offices received natural light and fresh air from both the exterior and the interior. All offices on the first three floors had large casement windows on the exterior and open archways into the galleries. The interior corridors were provided by open arched galleries instead of hallways enclosed on both sides. The fourth story rooms had skylights. Additional light came through the windows of the clerestory and lanterns through the roof and side bays.

Meigs' ventilation system was based on the central courtyard as a natural chimney. Hot air escaped through the clerestory windows and skylights. Air flow could be regulated by opening and closing the windows. An additional unique feature was air vents in the exterior wall, appearing as three bricks missing under each window. The flow of air upward through the roof would draw fresh

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air through the exterior wall openings. Radiators were under each window so that air coming in could be heated. Meigs claimed that the air changed every 2 minutes. The Victorians had discovered that diseases could be carried by air borne germs. The use of air vents in the exterior walls of the building was innovative for the time. Windows were double-glazed throughout and canvas awnings were installed at each window to provide shade.

Meigs used brick vaults to support the floors, and on the second and third floors he used brick domes on pendentives. Domes on pendentives were first used in Byzantine architecture and appeared in early Italian Renaissance architecture. They were not common in America at the time.

Delicate iron trusses were used to support the roof much like the train sheds, arcades, and exhibit halls of the Victorian age. Gas lights were installed throughout. Electric lights were used on a temporary basis for decorating the courtyard during inaugural balls. Electric lights were not installed throughout the building until 1900.

The characteristic red brick of the building was used as a matter of economy. Brick fireproofed the building and was used in masonry walls, vaults and even stairways. As an innovation, Meigs used brick for both the riser and the step of the stairs. It was advertised as the "largest exclusively brick building in the world" with 15 million bricks. 6

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Major Bibliographical References

The majority of material for this landmark nomination is taken from:

Historic Structures Report, U.S. Pension Building, NCR/GSA, Draft -- Phase I, January 1983. Conden Florence Keyes, Architect; Beth Sullebarger, Architectural Historian; Georgio Calalieri, FAIA, Associate Architect; Norman Weiss, Conservator.

Works also consulted

Historic Study No.1, Pension Building, General Services Administration, U.S., G.P.O., Washington, D.C., 1964

Pension Building, National Register Nomination Form, National Register of Historic Places, National Park Service, 1969

Weigley, Russell F., Quartermaster General of the Union Army, a Biography of M.C. Meigs, New York: Columbia University Press, 1959.

Skramstad, Harold K., "The Engineer as Architect in Washington: The Contribution of Montgomery C. Meigs," Records of the Columbia Historical Society, (Vol. 69-70, June, 1971), pp. 266-284.

McDaniel, "Caspar Buberl: The Pension Building Civil War Frieze and other Washington, D.C. Sculpture, "Records of the Columbia Historical Society, (Vol. 50, 1980) pp. 309-344.

Public Law 96-515 - December 12, 1980, Section 306

Personal Interview

Isabel Lowrey, Historian, National Building Museum, February 13, February 23, and April 19, 1984.

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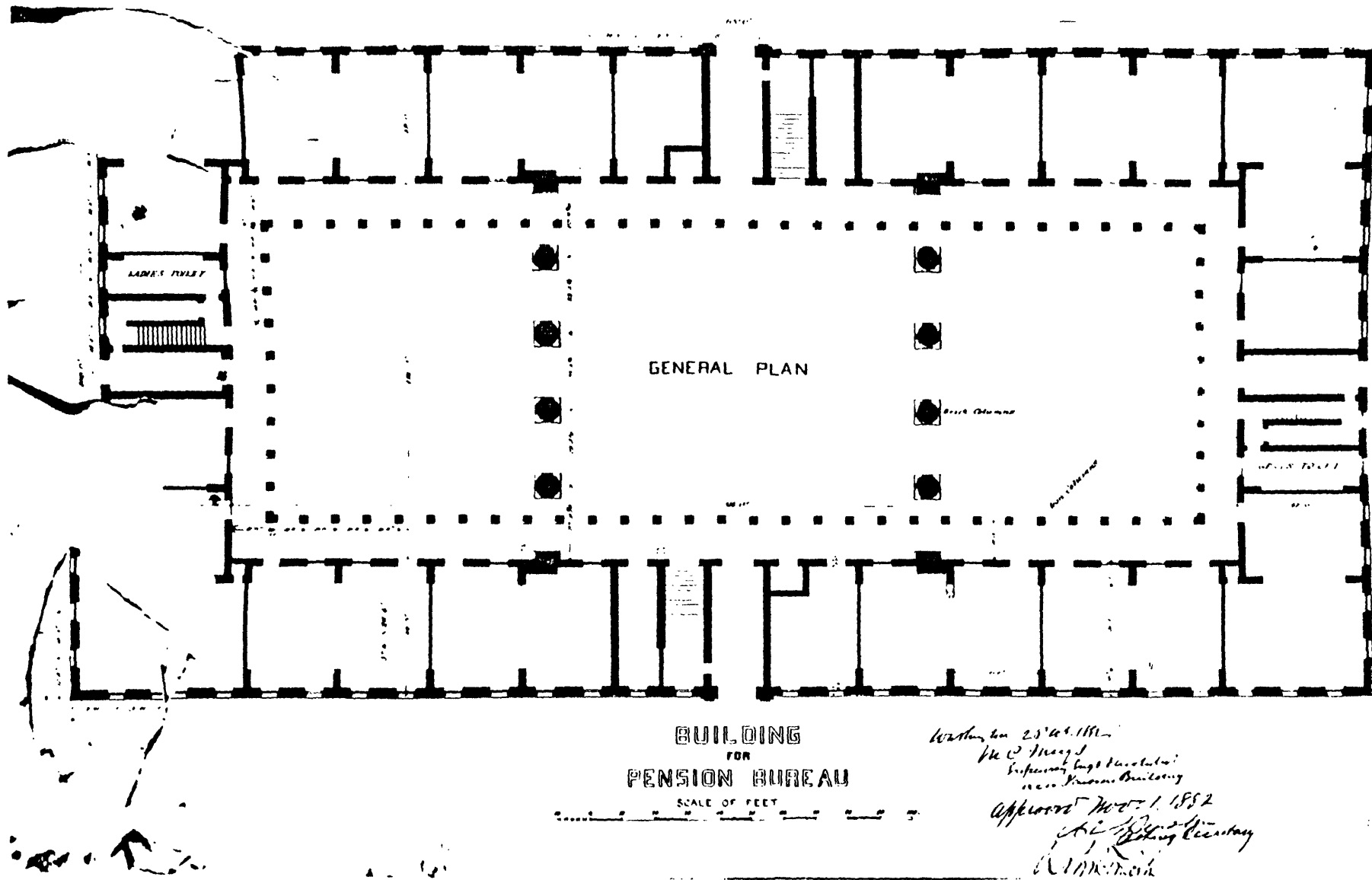
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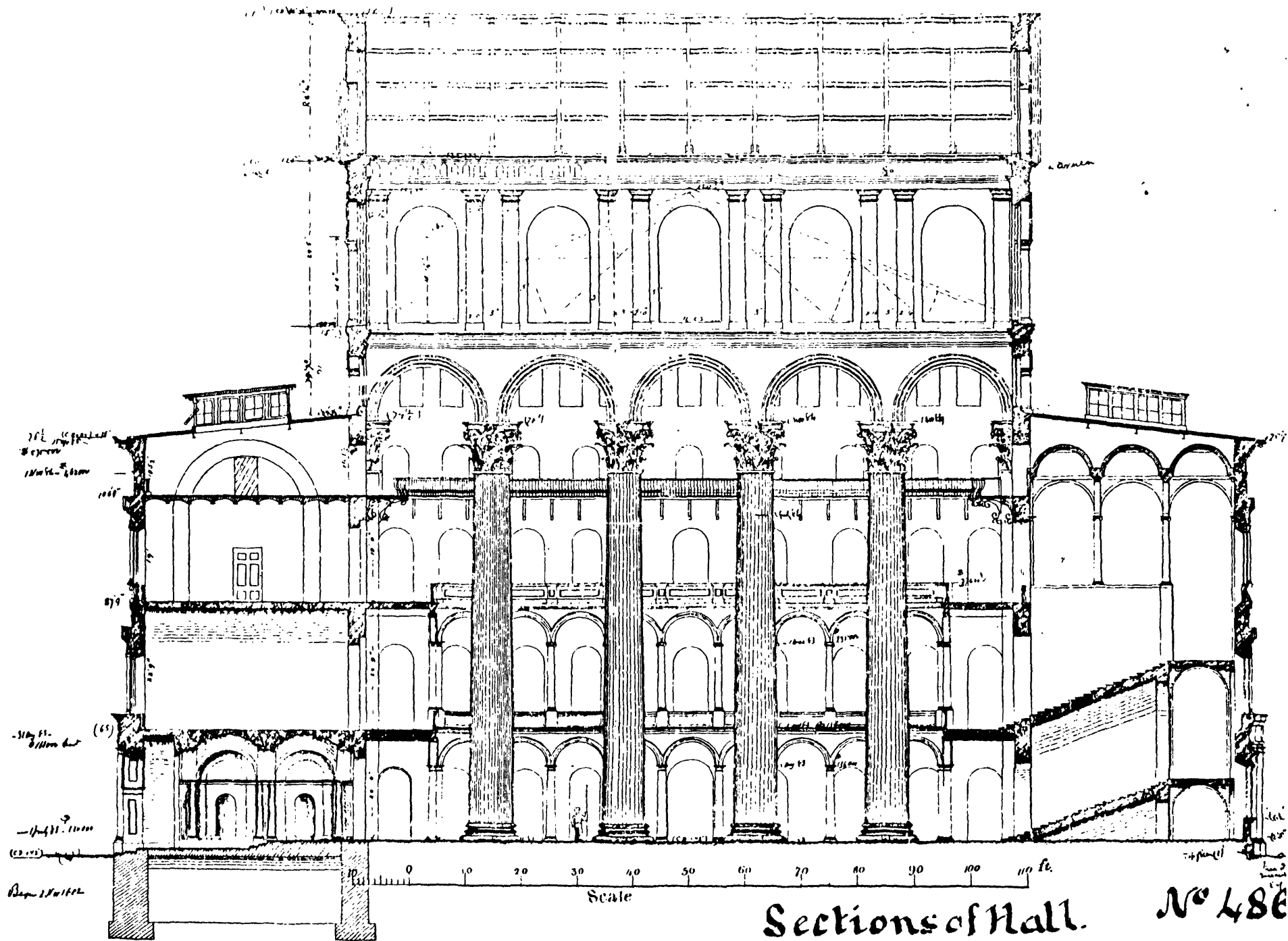
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FOOTNOTES

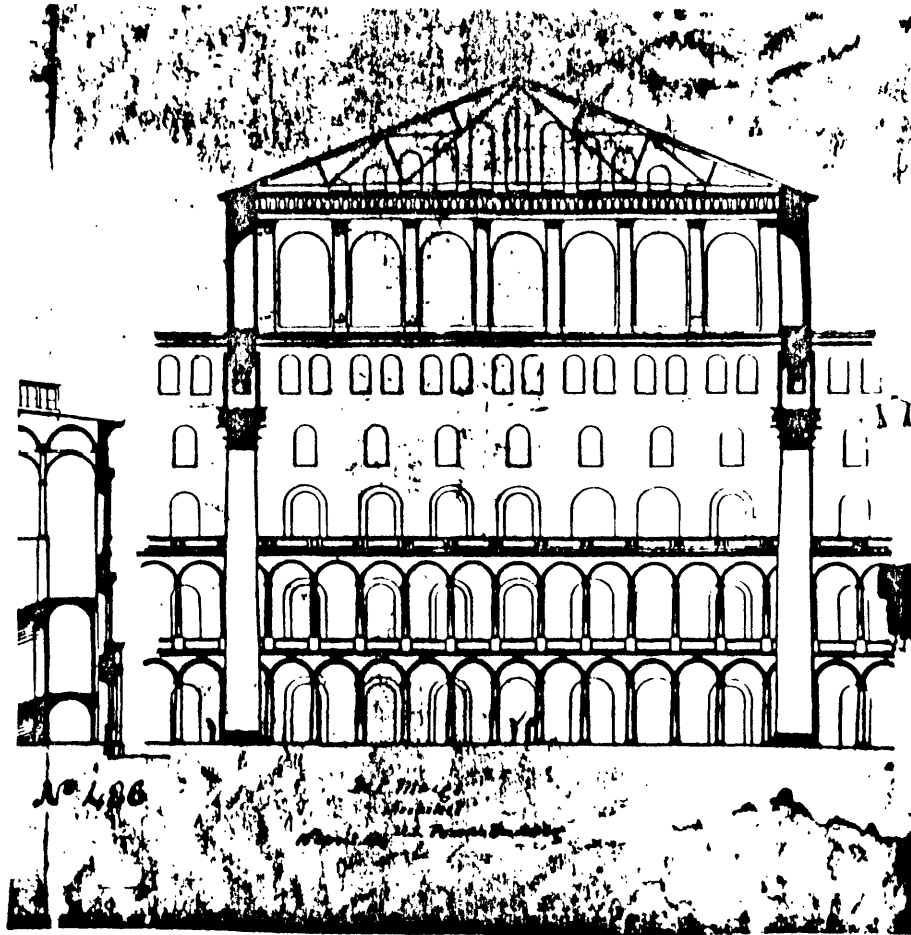
1. The Pension Building: A building in Search of a Client, (Chloethial Woodward Smith and Associated Architects, 1967), p. 7.
2. A Guide to the Architecture of Washington, D.C. (Washington Metropolitan Chapter, American Institute of Architects, 1965) p. 59.
3. General Services Administration, Historical Studies No. 1 - Pension Building (Washington, D.C.: GPO, 1964)
4. Joint Committee on Landmarks, as quoted in The Pension Building: A Building in Search of a Client, p. 1.
5. Public Law 95-515 - December 12, 1980, Section 306.
6. Meigs, Montgomery C., Annual Report of the Construction of the New Pension Building, September 16, 1885, p. 753.



Floor plan signed by Montgomery C. Meigs on Octo. 26, 1882 and approved by Robert Todd Lincoln, Secretary of War, Nov. 1, 1882. Notations indicate use of both brick and iron interior columns. Ink drawing. Collection of National Archives, Cartographic and Architectural Archives.



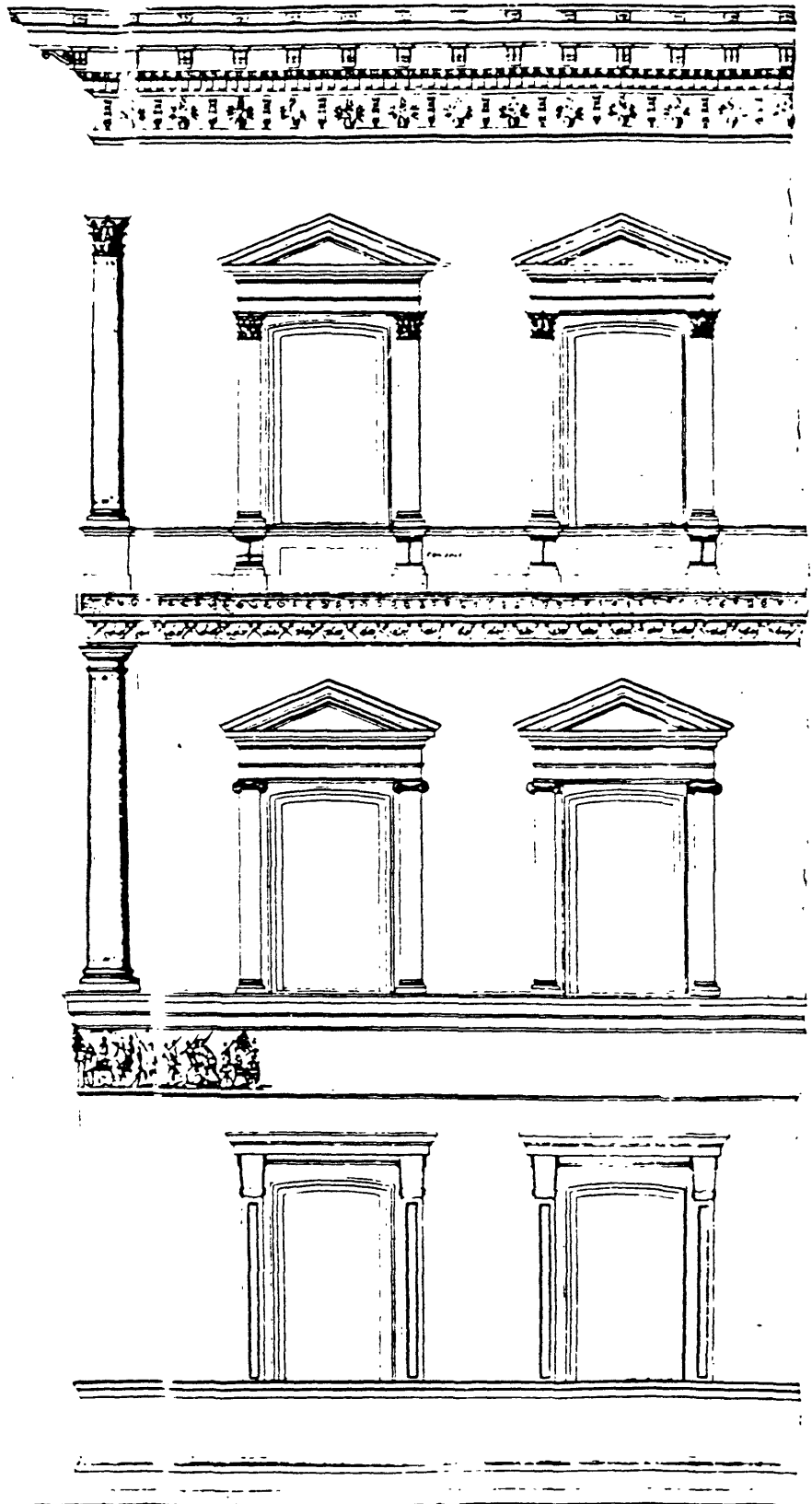
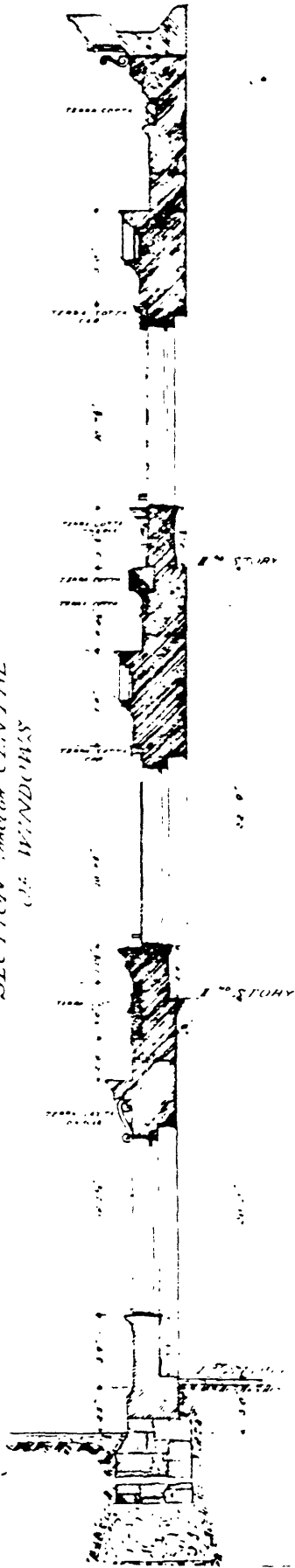
Section of "Hall" looking west. Inscribed: M. C. Meigs, 16th April, 1886. Ink drawing (No. 486).  
Collection of National Archives, Cartographic and Architectural Archives.



Section of "Hall" looking north. Inscribed: M. C. Meigs, 16th April, 1886. Ink drawing (No. 486).  
Collection of National Archives, Cartographic and Architectural Archives.



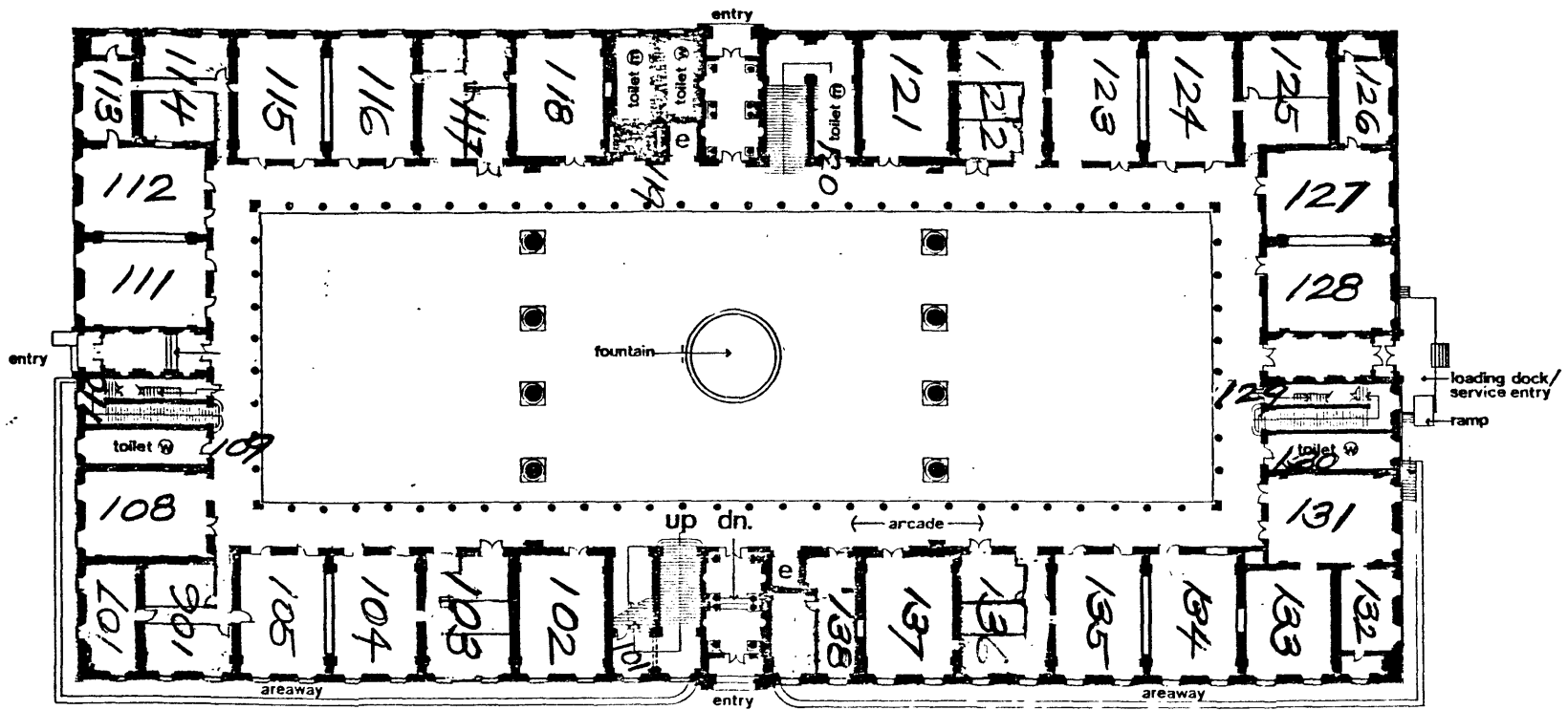
SECTION THROUGH CENTRE  
OF WINDOWS



ELEVATION OF CORNER

"Section through Centre of Windows" and "Elevation of Corner of Building." Bears notations of terra cotta elements. Ink drawing, no signature or date. Collection of National Archives, Cartographic and Architectural Archives.

G STREET



first floor plan

existing conditions, partitions & ceilings

scale 5' 10' 25' 50'



6461

