

# Panel looks back on Capitol restoration as building turns 100 years old

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It took a new tunnel leading out of the state Capitol to solve one of the major issues contractors struggled with when renovating the 100-year-old building.

For years, architect Laura Davis said, trucks idled on the entrance coming up East Washington Avenue and carried the trash out of offices elsewhere.

“That beautiful white marble was just black after a point [so] we really wanted to get that away from the Capitol, restore that entrance to what it was originally,” Davis said.

The team decided to build a new tunnel, joining the older tunnels around the Capitol that once carried hot steam from the nearby Capitol Heat & Power Plant. One option for the new tunnel was taking it out to Monona Terrace, which was being built around the same time.

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But the team stopped short of building the tunnel that far, instead opting to extend it to the Risser Justice Center, which now has electric carts carrying mail into the Capitol and carrying trash out of it, Davis said.

Davis, of Isthmus Architecture, was a top architect on the years-long restoration project of the state Capitol, which is now celebrating its 100th anniversary.

She spoke June 22 at a WisPolitics.com panel in Madison with Tim Jordan of J.P. Cullen, a project manager on the restoration, and historian Michael Edmonds, the

author of a just-released new book on the state Capitol, “The Wisconsin Capitol: Stories of a Monument and Its People.”

The three detailed the painstaking process behind restoring the Capitol to its original glory, with workers chipping away at layers of paint to find the original finishes, putting up platforms to retouch the artwork on the dome and putting back the gold leaf on the “Wisconsin” statue atop the Capitol because the talons of perched falcons had made it vulnerable to erosion.

“It was a learning curve for us, but it was very exciting because there were so many unique attributes about the building that really made it exciting to be working there,” said Jordan, a Madison native.

Construction on the current Capitol — Wisconsin’s fifth and the third in Madison — started in 1906 and finished in 1917. It was one of the crowning achievements for New York architect George Post, who also built the New York Stock Exchange Building.

Edmonds said a “huge repertoire” of workers came from around the world to work on the project.

But there was no ribbon ceremony to celebrate the opening, and the building wasn’t dedicated until much later. That’s partly because construction wrapped up just after the U.S. entered World War I and Wisconsinites were getting ready to send their sons to the trenches of Europe.

“There was no time to celebrate that the Capitol had been finished,” said Edmonds, the historian behind the exhibit at the Capitol and director of the Wisconsin Historical Society Programs and Outreach.

Two people died during the decade-long construction project, Edmonds said. One, a foreman, died when a multi-ton stone slab wasn’t balanced right and the facade his crew was working on fell.

The other, he said, was a steelworker who eyewitnesses said “had filled his capacity with liquor.”

It was a tradition for steelworkers to plant an American flag on top of a project when it reached its maximum height, so that’s what they did just before the Fourth of July. The steelworker and others had taken a day off, and he decided to go back up

to the top but lost his balance and fell, smashing through layers of planks and landing in the Capitol rotunda.

Edmonds also said the building went through 30 renovation projects between 1917 and the restoration project, making the task more difficult for those who helped restore it.

Davis, for example, recounted how workers would have to rub off layers of paint on walls until they found the original. She also said one of her friends thought all she did was work on the Capitol bathrooms, noting she “spent months on my knees measuring tile” and figuring out patterns during the restoration.

While restorers were able to keep the original counter tops and panelling, she said, they had to cut some parts of the stone to make sure the dimensions met federal standards governing access for people with disabilities.

Jordan also recounted the work that went into fixing cracks and windows on the dome and giving the artwork “a nice fresh coat of paint” — that is, after workers uncovered past paint jobs, logged them and got approval for the repainting plans. He said an impressive level of artistry went into the original design. Only the most skilled workers could work on the restoration, he added, because “the detail was just too difficult.”

“Everyone wanted to be here because it was a great job,” he said.

When asked whether the Capitol was haunted, Edmonds said he found no ghost stories while researching his book.

Davis also assured attendees that it isn't.

“I have been in every nook and cranny of that building,” she said, “and I have never sensed another presence.”

Listen to the audio:

<https://soundcloud.com/wispolitics/secrets-of-the-capitol-luncheon>

See more on Edmonds' book:

[http://www.wisconsinhistory.org/whspress/books/book.asp?book\\_id=559](http://www.wisconsinhistory.org/whspress/books/book.asp?book_id=559)