



Montgomery C. Meigs and the Building of the Nation's Capital (Perspectives on the Art and Architectural History of the United States Capitol)

William C. Dickinson

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At the age of thirty-six in 1852, Lt. Montgomery Cunningham Meigs of the Army Corps of Engineers reported to Washington, D. C., for duty as a special assistant to the chief army engineer, Gen. Joseph G. Totten. It was a fateful assignment, both for the nation's capital and for the bright, ambitious, and politically connected West Point graduate. Meigs's forty-year tenure in the nation's capital was by any account spectacularly successful. He surveyed, designed, and built the Washington water supply system, oversaw the extension of the U.S. Capitol and the erection of its massive iron dome, and designed and supervised construction of the Pension Building, now the home of the National Building Museum. The skills he exhibited in supervising engineering projects were carefully noted by political leaders, including president-elect Abraham Lincoln, who named Meigs quartermaster general of the Union Army, the most important position he would hold during his long and active military career. Meigs believed Washington, D. C., should be the reincarnation of Rome, the ancient capital of the Roman Empire. He endeavored to memorialize the story of the American nation in all the structures he built.

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