

CHAPTER ONE

CHATEAU ON A HILL



Governor Frank Black

WINTER WITHHELD ITS COLD BREATH THAT YEAR AS IF PURPOSELY TO HELP ALONG the hurried work of finishing the new Capitol. Crews labored in day and night shifts. They would have been working Sundays, too, except that some religious organizations protested.

The sheds of stonecutters and masons came down. Rubble was whisked away. The premises were raw and muddy—no walks, no landscaping. But in late December 1897 New Yorkers could finally get a clear look at the fabulous structure on the hill to which so much of their tax money had gone. There had never been such a building!

The reason for the sudden haste was the determination of Governor Frank S. Black to walk up the seventy seven steps of the Eastern Approach of the Capitol on the first day of the New Year and open the front door. It would be a symbolic public act and at the same time give him a great deal of personal satisfaction.

For almost twenty years the state government had been operating without a front door—ever since the old Capitol was vacated. The new Capitol had been in gradually increasing use during that time, though incomplete. Access was gained via side entrances not yet dignified by porticos.

Governor Black had vowed to finish the Capitol during his term. In his January 1, 1897, inaugural message to the State Legislature he had said:

This subject may well be approached with reluctance. It is about thirty years since the building was started, and over \$22,000,000 have been appropriated and spent or sunk. It has dragged itself through nearly a third of a century, always clamoring for money, until the people have nearly despaired of its completion and have come to regard it as an affliction from which time affords but little hope of relief. If an individual or a corporation had managed an undertaking as this has been man-

aged, they would have been discredited years ago. . . . This building ought to be finished at once. The work should be done by contract, and sufficient money appropriated to pay for it. The State needs the structure for its uses, but it needs still more to escape the scandal of a building of enormous cost and unparalleled extravagance undergoing at the same time the process of construction at one end and decay at the other.¹

At the end of Black's first year in office, the Capitol was not yet finished, but the end was in sight. The superb front flight of steps—the Eastern Approach—was done, except for some carving.



Eastern Approach, looking southeast toward State Street, ca. 1890s

The construction of the Capitol had dominated Albany life since the Civil War. An entire generation had grown up since it was begun. It had taken as long to erect as the Great Pyramid of Cheops. It had cost twice as much as the U.S. Capitol at Washington.² Controversy had swirled around it. Long before it had reached this stage, its fame had spread throughout the world. Travelers came to gaze at it, unfinished as it was. Magazine pieces were written about it. Governor Lucius Robinson had called it a public calamity. Friendlier observers saw it as the country's most interesting public building. It was the expression of an era of American life. It was a veritable school of architecture and museum of stone carving. Perhaps nowhere else was there a building in which architecture and politics had been so closely intertwined. In one instance, the style of its architecture actually had been legislated.

It had another uniqueness: it did not look as a Capitol was supposed to look. Almost by unwritten law, Capitol buildings in the United States had domes. This one was conspicuously domeless.

Situated at the top of the rise from the Hudson River, it had somewhat the aspect of a New World castle, a quality accentuated by its whiteness. The light hued Maine granite so carefully selected for its exterior was as yet unsullied by atmospheric grime. The plateau on which it stood was 150 feet above the river's tidewater, and the face of the building rose more than 100 feet still higher. The imposing effect was magnified by the fact that it was taller than any other building in the city.

Instead of a dome, the skyline of this unconventional Capitol had four corner pavilions accented with red tiled pyramidal roofs punctuated by handsome dormers and tall chimney stacks. The building's style of architecture might take some untangling. But the roof features provided valid and striking architectural comparison—to a French Renaissance chateau of the reign of Francis I.

The building had been a steadily growing problem for ten governors before Governor Black inherited it in 1897. Ground

was broken under Reuben Fenton in 1867, and John T. Hoffman laid the cornerstone in 1871. John A. Dix and Samuel J. Tilden watched its walls rise. Lucius Robinson so detested the building that he refused to move in when the north central section of the building was opened, and thus it remained for Alonzo B. Cornell to be the first to use the executive suite. Reform minded Grover Cleveland tried to speed things up by putting an experienced builder architect in charge. David B. Hill fought to keep that official's hands from being tied and then sweated through the scandal of the Assembly Chamber ceiling. Roswell P. Flower signed appropriations with the refrain that "the wisest economy now is to complete the building."³ Levi P. Morton instigated a private contract system instead of day labor but had trouble getting it rolling.

Frank Black, a prosperous lawyer from Troy, was a tall, spare man of scholarly mien. A gift for oratory had helped him in politics; when the Republicans ran him for governor in 1896, one of his campaign promises was to finish up "that building" on the Albany hill. Soon after his election, the New York Tribune editorialized: "There are two things which the State Capitol at Albany may confidently be relied on to furnish: an enduring opportunity to spend large sums of money, and an occasion for speculation as to when, if ever, the huge pile will be finished."⁴

Governor Black quickly got a compliant Legislature to abolish the existing Capitol Commission and to transfer its powers to the state superintendent of public works, who was then to complete the Capitol "by contract."⁵ He was George W. Aldridge, an experienced building contractor from Rochester, as well as the aggressive political boss of Monroe County. The contracts that Aldridge awarded stipulated that the Eastern Approach and the main entrance must be finished before January 1, 1898. Hence the hectic work with the day and night crews. The abnormally mild weather was a godsend. There was no serious snow until the last day of 1897.

On New Year's morning Governor Black rode up to the Eagle Street edge of the undeveloped space that would become



George W. Aldridge,
Superintendent of Public Works



The east facade of the Capitol during the final phases
of construction, looking up State Street, 1895



Capitol after completion, looking up State Street, 1900

East Capitol Park. There a select group of dignitaries awaited. Superintendent Aldridge had laid a plank walk across the frozen mud to the foot of the staircase.

The governor led a small procession across the planks, up the middle of the staircase, and under the groin vaults. Beside him walked, on the one hand, Superintendent Aldridge, on the other, the governor's son, Arthur. The attorney general and his staff followed and then the heads of various other State departments. The march was flanked by a squad of police guards.

At the New Year's reception in the Executive Chamber, Governor Black accepted plaudits, and the talk was mainly about how fast the work on the Capitol had been done in the past nine months. This year in his annual message to the legislature,

Governor Black declared that "There will be no further alteration. The structure will be completed, the sheds torn down and the walks laid out, before the first day of next October. There has not been a time in the last fifteen years that reasonable effort would not have accomplished these things in twenty-four months."⁶

The Spanish American War flared that summer. A special session of the Legislature was called to decide how New York should play its part. In spite of this interruption, the governor kept his promise about the Capitol.

In July there was a decisive charge up San Juan Hill in Cuba. The hero of it returned home to be elected governor of New York. Theodore Roosevelt was the first governor to take the oath of office in the finished Capitol.



Old Capitol, designed by Philip Hooker and built in 1806–1809