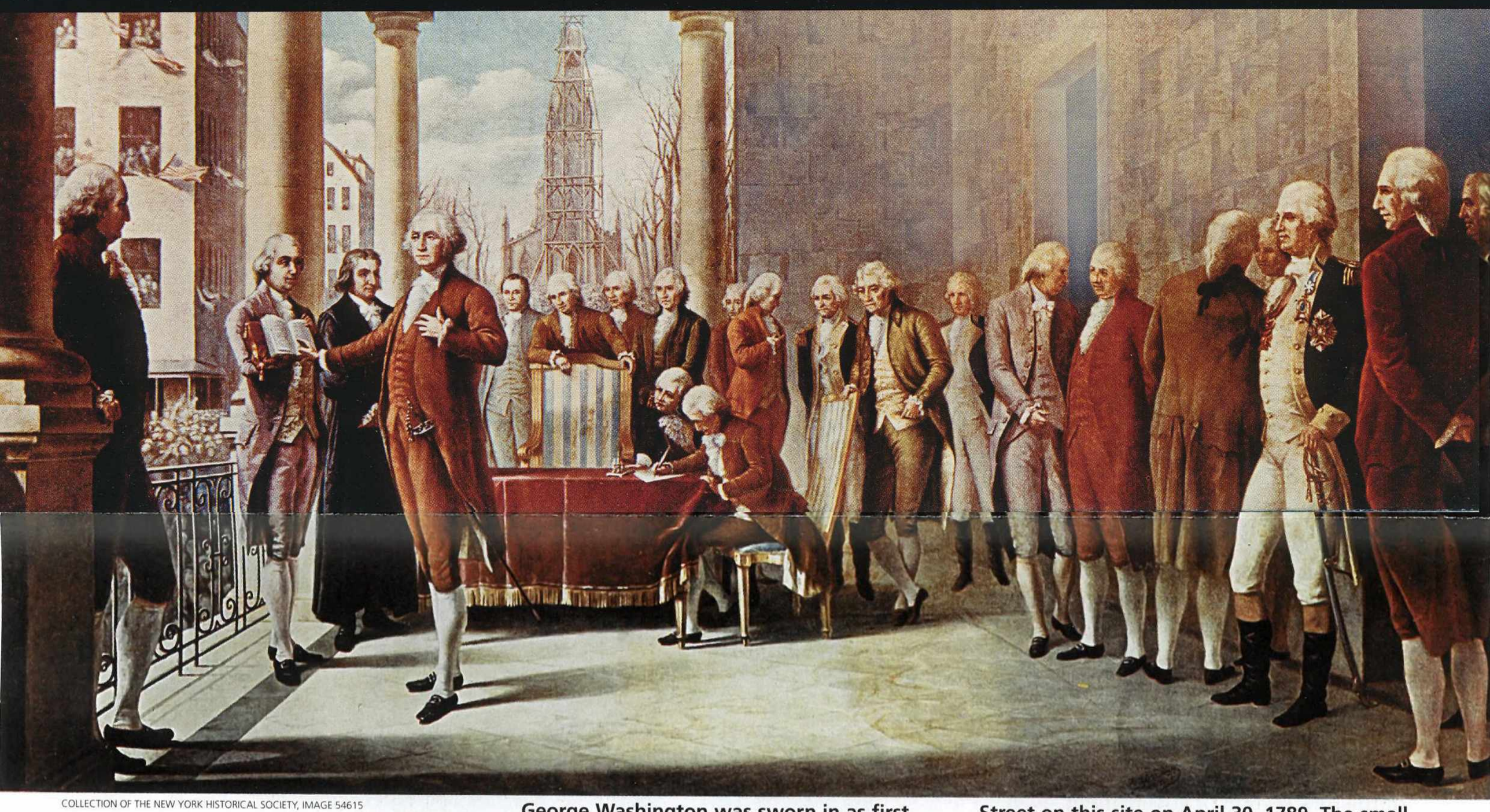
Federal Hall

National Park Service
U.S. Department of the Interior

Federal Hall National Memorial
New York



COLLECTION OF THE NEW YORK HISTORICAL SOCIETY, IMAGE 54615

George Washington was sworn in as first President of the United States on a second-floor, open-air balcony overlooking Wall Street on this site on April 30, 1789. The small Bible held by Secretary of the Senate Samuel Otis is on exhibit in today's Federal Hall.

George Washington Inaugurated Here as First U.S. President

In our progress toward political happiness my station is new; and if I may use the expression, I walk on untrodden ground. There is scarcely any part of my conduct which may not hereafter be drawn into precedent.
—George Washington, January 9, 1790

On April 30, 1789, the corner of Wall and Broad streets was awash in people. As a hush settled on the crowd all eyes fixed on the tall man standing above them on the balcony. He was surrounded by officials of the new government of the United States and of the city and state of New York. The man was George Washington, and he was by now a living legend. His journey from Mount Vernon to this balcony had been one long parade, with town after town turning out to greet him with salutes, bands, and elaborate pageantry.

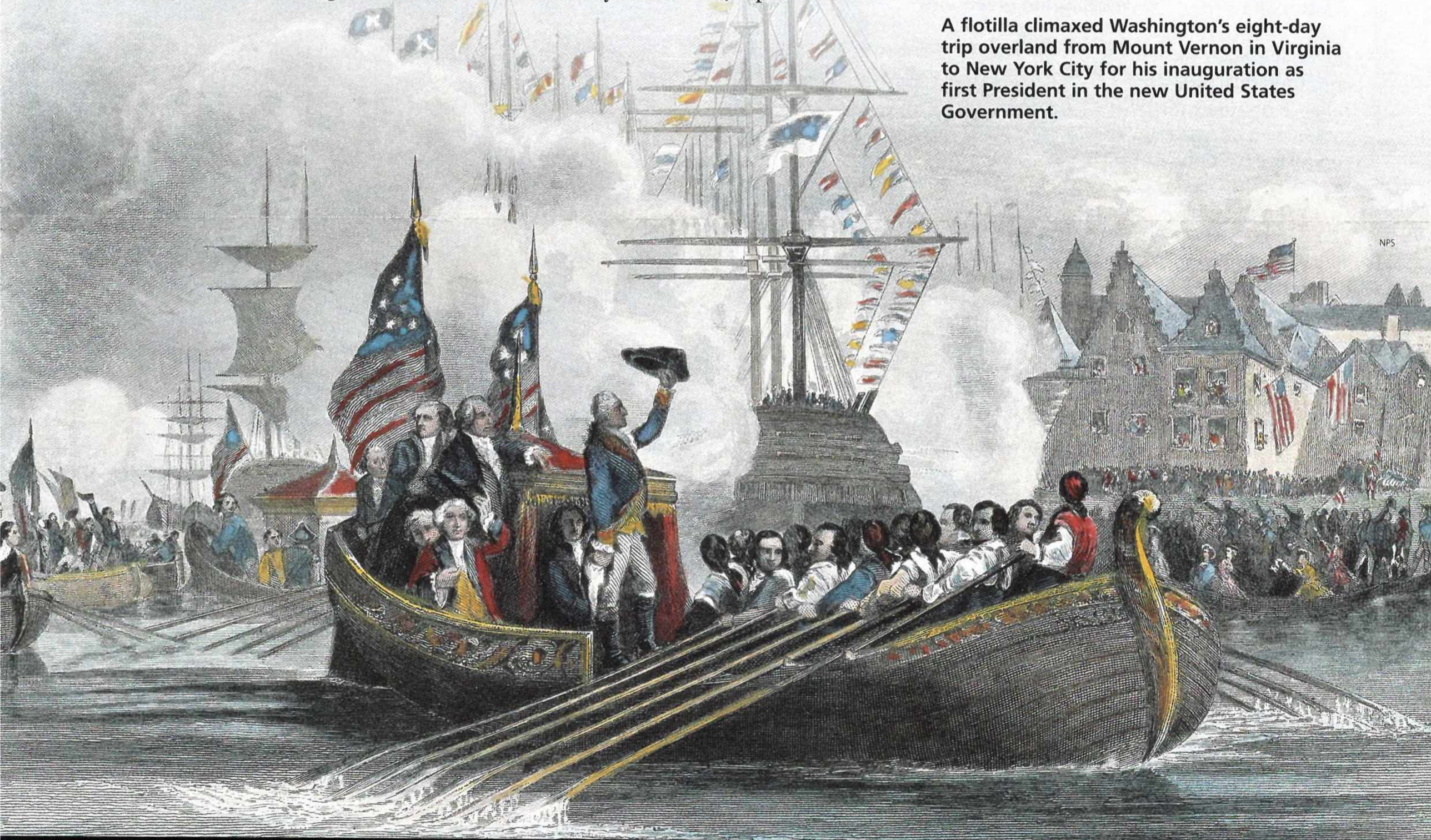
Already older than most people present, the building where Washington stood had been built in 1703 for the British royal governor's council and the assembly of New York. This was also New York City Hall, so prisoners were held and trials conducted here. In an influential verdict in 1735 a jury found printer Peter Zenger not guilty of libel. Articles in Zenger's newspaper had criticized the Royal Governor. Zenger's defense was that he only printed the truth!

After Britain's imposition of the Stamp Act in 1765, delegates of nine colonies met here to air grievances, declaring "no taxation without representation." In 1775 the revolutionary Provincial Assembly of New York took over use of the building. After the American Revolution this became the nation's capitol when, in 1785, the Congress under the Articles of Confederation sat here.

Washington's arrival inaugurated a new era in the life of the struggling young nation. Four years earlier, representatives of Virginia and Maryland had met at Mount Vernon to discuss weaknesses of the Articles of Confederation, the United States' first plan of government. Their discussion led to meetings at Annapolis, Md., and, in 1787, Philadelphia. This last meeting would produce the system of government under which the United States of America operates to this day.

Ratifying the new Constitution had been a hard-fought battle, and many Americans harbored serious doubts about the document. The Constitution was indeed a compromise, a framework that would be filled in by experience and the actions of the new government. Most important was the passage here in 1790 of the first amendments to the Constitution, which became known as the Bill of Rights. Here at New York's old colonial city hall, now newly refurbished by architect Pierre L'Enfant and renamed Federal Hall, a new experiment would begin.

A flotilla climaxed Washington's eight-day trip overland from Mount Vernon in Virginia to New York City for his inauguration as first President in the new United States Government.



NPS

From City Hall to Federal Hall and Beyond

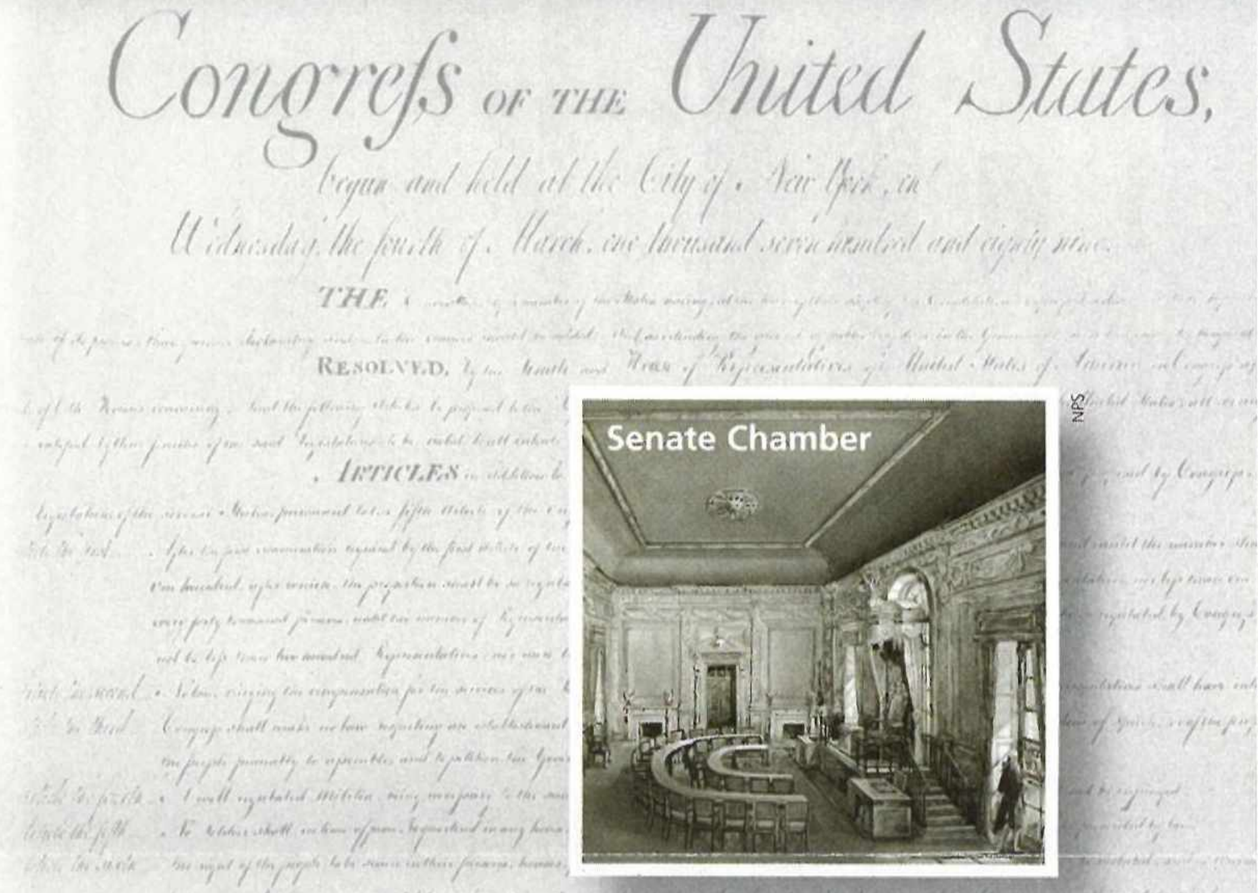
A Bill of Rights and the First Congress Launch the Nation

As the new government met, the stakes were high, and all eyes were again on new President George Washington and the Congress. Despite Washington's universal popularity, many worried about what presidential precedents he might set. The nation's direction was still in doubt.

Many states, including New York, had withheld approval of the Constitution until assured that it would guarantee rights like freedom of speech, religion, and assembly. North Carolina and Rhode Island still had not ratified the document as the new government met. However, passage of 10 of the proposed 12 new amendments guaranteed basic rights and fostered broad acceptance of the new system of government, even among skeptics.

This single, seven-month session of the first Congress left a lasting mark on the United States by filling in the framework of the Constitution with laws and precedents. In addition to the Bill of Rights, Congress passed the Judiciary Act that established the coexistence of state and federal courts and laws. Some important precedents set were the Senate's role in diplomacy, Presidential control of cabinet appointments, and how the President should be addressed. The republic was launched.

The Constitution *(right)* replaced the Articles of Confederation to guide the nation. When Washington was sworn in, two states had not ratified it.

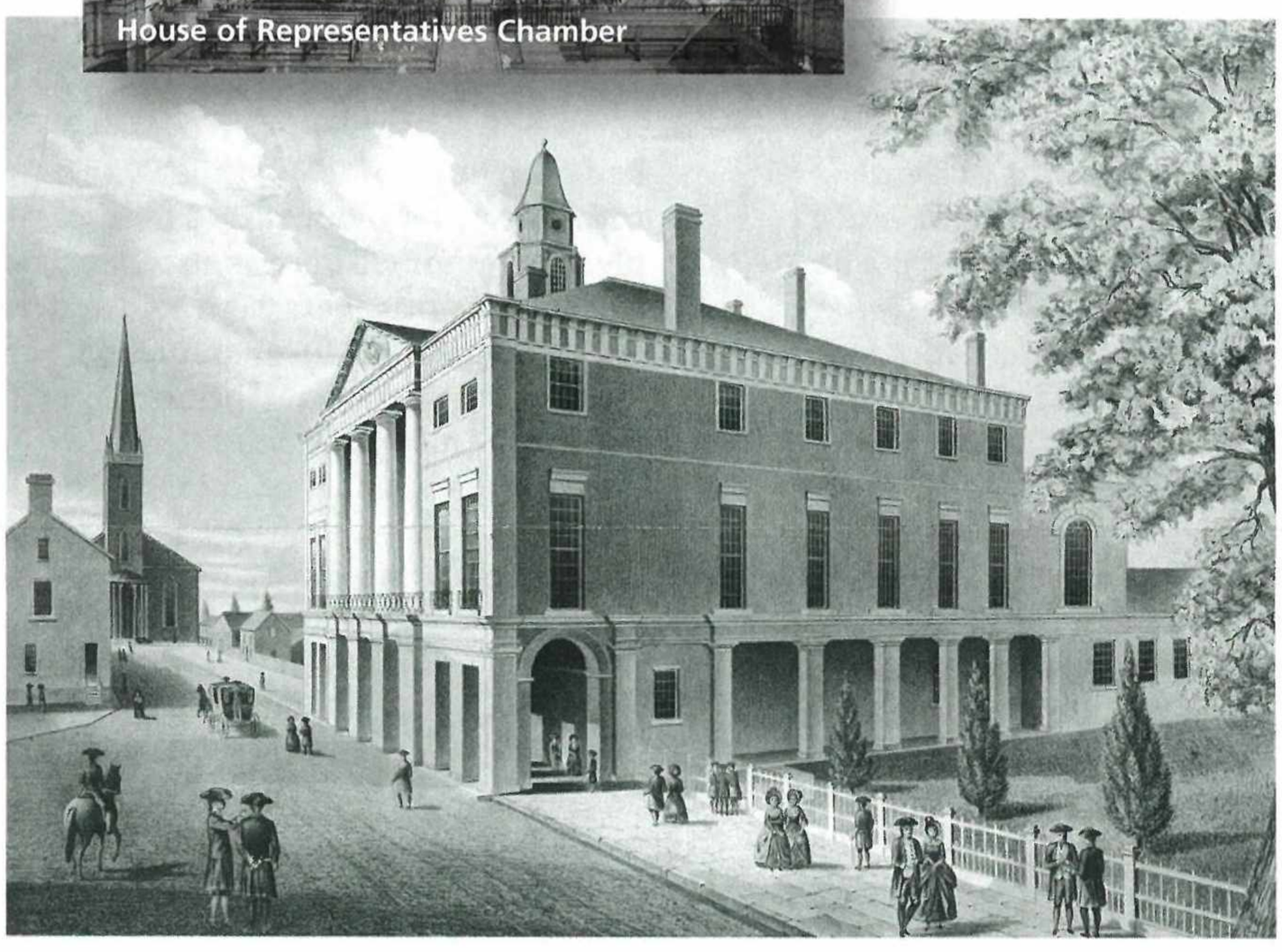


Senate Chamber

NPS


House of Representatives Chamber

NPS



LIBRARY OF CONGRESS

When Pierre L'Enfant remodeled Federal Hall he added a Greek Revival temple front *(right)*.

Custom House and U.S. Sub-Treasury

The first Congress sidestepped a root question: how could the government secure funds? Federal reliance on states for money had doomed the Articles of Confederation. By 1812, when Federal Hall was demolished, tariff and banking issues divided the nation.

The present building arose in 1842 as a splendid Greek Revival Customs House, by which time Wall Street was already established as a center of finance. In 1862 the building became one of six Federal Sub-Treasuries storing silver and gold, until replaced by the Federal Reserve Bank in 1920.

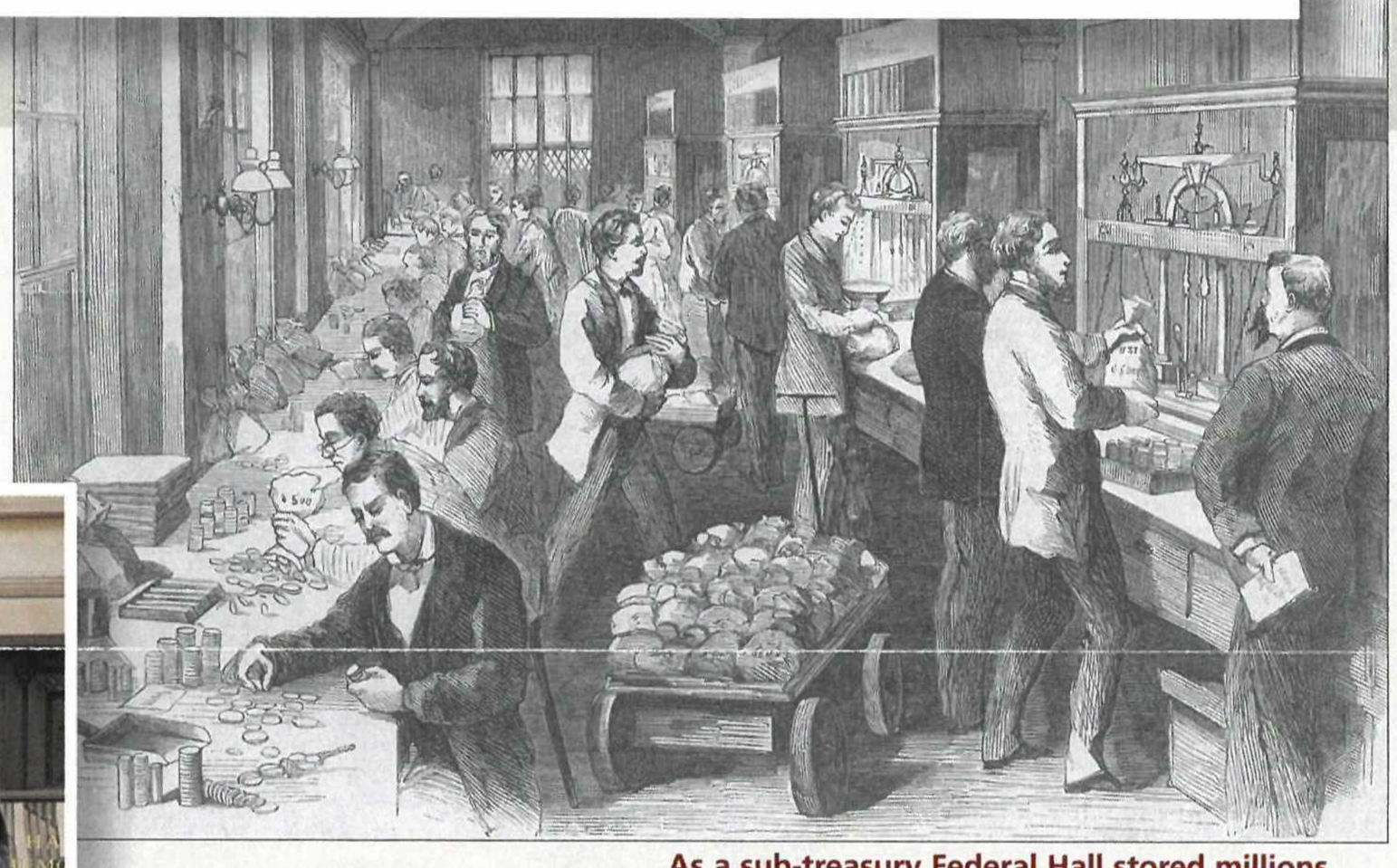
This statue of George Washington greets visitors to Federal Hall. *Below:* The Federal Hall rotunda.



NPS/MMUSE



NPS/MMUSE



NPS

As a sub-treasury Federal Hall stored millions of dollars in gold and silver in its basement.

Planning Your Visit

Federal Hall is located at 26 Wall Street between Nassau and William streets. Open 9 am to 5 pm Monday through Friday, and Monday through Saturday from Memorial Day through Labor Day. Closed Thanksgiving and Christmas. *Parking is limited and very expensive; use public transportation.*

Visit www.mta.info for bus and subway routes and schedules. Exhibits and a video honor the site's history. A museum, bookstore, and tours (guided and self-guiding) are available.

More Information
National Park Service
Manhattan Sites
26 Wall St.
New York, NY 10005
212-825-6990
www.nps.gov/feha

Federal Hall National Memorial is one of over 400 parks in the National Park System. To learn more visit www.nps.gov

☆GPO 2016—393-466/30827 Last updated 2016
Printed on recycled paper.