Almost everyone who visits the United States Capitol building today, first watches a short, thirteen minute film about the roots of America, the establishment of Congress, and the construction of the U.S. Capitol Building. The movie is titled *E Pluribus Unum*, meaning in Latin, “out of many one.” Emblazoned on the seal of the United States, *E Pluribus Unum*, is the foundation American government sits upon. It is a reminder that although Congressmen and Senators regularly inhabit the Capitol Building, it actually belongs to the people, the citizens of the United States of America. The Capitol tour seeks to reconnect the citizens to their building.

According to the United States Census Bureau, the state of Illinois is home to approximately 12,910,409 people.\(^1\) It has nineteen congressional districts and two Senators.\(^2\) I was fortunate enough to intern for the current Senate Assistant Majority Leader, Senator Richard Durbin, who among other things, places an emphasis on the importance of his constituents. One of my primary duties as summer intern was to give tours of the Capitol Building to constituents. Any constituent can access the tour request form on the Senator’s website and request tours of the Capitol building, White House, Bureau of Engraving and Printing, and the Library of Congress. While Senator Durbin’s office cannot always guarantee tours of the other sites, it is made a priority to give any constituent interested, a tour of the Capitol Building.

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The tour coordinator, Sarah, impressed upon our intern group that a constituent’s tour of the Capitol may be the only time they interact with the Senator’s office. It was our responsibility as tour guides and representatives from the Senator’s office to make that interaction a positive one. Within a week at my internship, I gave my first Capitol tour and quickly came to appreciate the importance of the building itself.

Access to the Capitol Building has undergone a more restrictive transformation with the advent of modern security concerns and increased numbers of visitors. As a middle school student, I recall visiting Capitol Building with my mother and brother. After a short screening process, we were able to tour the building at leisure and by ourselves. Today, however, visitors are required to be escorted by a staff member or an official tour guide. In many ways, this makes the Capitol Building seem less available to the public.

A more welcome addition to the Capitol Building is the recent construction of a spacious, air conditioned, and modern structure called the Capitol Visitor Center (CVC). Commissioned in 2000, the CVC “was designed to enhance the security, educational experience, and comfort of those visiting the U.S. Capitol.” The Capitol Building, which had remained structurally mostly unchanged since the Civil War, was not suited for the increase in visitors due to the growth of not only the U.S. population but also modern tourism. Visitors to the Capitol often had to line up outside the building and while waiting in long queues, were subjected to the elements and the weather conditions. By the beginning of the 21st century, the Capitol was receiving as many as 3.5 million visitors a year and concerns about the safety of staff, representatives, and visitors mounted.  

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4 Stathis, pg 3.
The new structure is approximately two thirds the size of the Capitol Building at 580,000 square feet and is built underground as to not detract from the visual and historical integrity of the Capitol itself.\(^5\) The building design sought to protect the Fredrick Law Olmsted landscaping of the East Capitol Grounds, which the famous landscape architect created in 1874.\(^6\)

The center additionally houses Exhibition Hall—the only exhibit dedicated exclusively to Congress and its accomplishments—as well as two movie theaters, an auditorium, a restaurant, two gift shops, an information center, statues from the National Statuary Collection and additional meeting room space.\(^7\) Ultimately, despite the large price tag, the CVC provides a comfortable and safe entrance and is the perfect place to meet constituents before their Capitol Tour. In the Congressional Research Service report, *The Capitol Visitor Center: An Overview*, the importance of the CVC as a medium to reopen the building to the people is apparent:

“Almost alone among the parliaments of the world, the U.S. Capitol has consistently remained ‘the people’s house,’ open to all visitors, surrounded and enhanced by grounds designed by Fredrick Law Olmsted, Sr., the father of American landscape architecture.”\(^8\)

While the Capitol Building may often be thought of as the office building for our Congressmen and Senators, it is also a living museum. It gives insight into the development of the nation and reflects the various periods in the long history that is the United States of America. Portions of U.S. history books come alive when in the Capitol Building.

On September 18, 1793, President George Washington laid the first cornerstone of the United States Capitol Building in a ceremony filled with celebration. Unfortunately, uncooperative architects and cumbersome sandstone that had to be sent by boat from the quarries

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\(^5\) Stathis, pg 1-2.  
\(^6\) Stathis, pg 1.  
\(^7\) Stathis, pg 4.  
\(^8\) Stathis, pg 3.
in Virginia plagued the beginning of the construction process. Although Congress was first able to occupy the building in 1800, the building remained unfinished. By the time America went to war with Britain again in 1812, only a temporary wooden passageway connected the North and South wings. Then on August 24, 1814 the British troops set fire to the building, leaving the United States Capitol in disrepair and ruin. Following the war, it took approximately fourteen more years for the Capitol to finally be considered complete. It housed the Senate, House of Representatives, the Supreme Court, and the Library of Congress.9

However, as the country grew, so did the government, and by 1850 it had outgrown the existing building and construction started again. The new architect faced the daunting task of expanding both wings of the building and creating an even more imposing central dome. The House of Representatives moved to their new chamber in 1857 and the Senate moved in 1859. When the Civil War began in 1861, the dome had not yet been completed and most construction temporarily ceased. The building even briefly served as a barracks and hospital for the union. Then in 1863 the Statue of Freedom was placed on top of the Capitol dome. At a height of 19 feet and 3 inches, the bronze cast weighed almost 15,000 pounds and its placement signified the completion of the building and would became a symbol of the country. Until 2000, when the Capitol Visitor Center was commissioned, the building remained much like it did when it was completed in 1863, with no large additions to the main structure.10

10 “Capitol Construction History”
1. Original North Wing (Senate)
2. Original South With (House) – current National Statuary Hall
4. The Current House (left) and Senate (right) Chambers

Visitors to the Capitol building enjoy seeing the development of the Capitol Building. In my experience with constituents on tours, they were often shocked at the small size of the Old Senate Chamber when compared to the current one. I often had to remind the constituents that when the Senate moved in 1859, there were only sixty-six Senators. Looking down the passageway from the old senate chamber, visitors can see the entrance to the current, larger chambers. If they visit their Senator’s office, they can even pick up gallery passes and get the chance to enter the chamber’s galleries.

A visit to the Capitol also reminds citizens of another interesting historical development. The Supreme Court was actually housed in the Capitol Building until 1935. That means for 134 years, the entire third branch of the federal government was housed within the second branch’s

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11 http://www.aoc.gov/cc/capitol/c_const_seq.cfm
I personally found it difficult to believe that the Supreme Court once operated out of a basement room in the Capitol Building referred colloquially to as the dungeon, when today it resides in a separate large and monumental building.

The interior of the Capitol reflects the historic growth of the nation as well. It houses large paintings, beautifully decorated hallways, and numerous statues. The Capitol is home to the National Statuary Collection, which connects every person from every state to an object in the Capitol Building.

As the House of Representatives prepared to move down the hall to their new larger chambers in 1857, Representatives became concerned about the future use of their existing chamber. It was eventually proposed in 1864 that the room become the home to what is now known as the National Statuary Collection. As an intern in an Illinois Senator’s office, we often credited the President during that time, Abraham Lincoln, with the idea. In reality, Representative Justin Morrill was the real mastermind of National Statuary Hall. Each state was to donate two statues to the Capitol. The only restrictions were that the statue had to be made out of marble or bronze and be of a deceased individual, generally important to the state’s history.

With the addition of new states, the hall became overcrowded with heavy statues and the structure of the chamber floor became unable to support the large number of statues. In 1933 Congress passed a resolution to move some statues to other locations in the building, including the Rotunda, the Crypt, the Hall of Columns, and now the Capitol Visitor Center.¹⁴

In some cases, the statues have fallen into obscurity. For example, the state of Illinois—the home of President Abraham Lincoln—donated statues of James Shield and Frances

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Willard. While both were at one time important state figures, very few constituents who toured the Capitol with Senator Durbin’s office, were familiar with their names. None of the statues of Abraham Lincoln in the Capitol were commissioned or donated by Illinois.

Until 2000, when Congress passed legislation approving the replacement of statues, states were required to be represented by what they or their citizens may have considered obsolete figures. The replacement process is not simple and is subject to approval. Therefore, to this date, only three states have replaced statues: Alabama with Helen Keller, California with Ronald Reagan, and Kansas with Dwight Eisenhower.

The Capitol is also filled with folklore, passed from tour guide-to-tour guide and generation-to-generation. Capitol folklore includes the story of the ghost of Chief Justice Taney’s cat, who appears outside the Supreme Court chamber as an omen of bad things to come. There is also a myth about the Rotunda serving as a very successful civil war hospital, prompting field hospital tents to be constructed in a circular shape. Unfortunately for the U.S. army, it was the sanitation in the Capitol Building and not the shape of the Rotunda that produced such high survival rates. The myth holds that the army had to sell their circular hospital tents, reportedly to Barnum and Bailey’s circus.

While these stories are humorous, they allow the people who visit to relate to a building that sometimes seems as distant as the federal legislature. Many people will never read a Senate bill from beginning to end, but they can understand the significance of an ominous ghost story or appreciate the hilarious idea that circular circus tents started with the U.S. army.

16 “About the National Statuary Hall Collection”
My most rewarding experience as a summer intern was not writing legislative letters or attending briefings, it was the smiles and gracious “thank yous” I received from constituents following a tour. On one tour, I met a family from the small town of Macomb, Illinois. After a short conversation we realized they knew some of my relatives from the same town. Shortly after their visit and tour, I got word that they had given a glowing and positive review of my Capitol tour to my relatives. Other interns received letters from children and adults alike, thanking them for their tour. While Congress fulfills many important duties, the people need to remember that they are the base of Congress’s legislative power. The Capitol Building is the people’s building, and the Capitol tour gives citizens access to an important part of their government and history. E Pluribus Unum.