When Michigan commemorated the bicentennial birthday of its first governor in 2011, the ceremony occurred in a place largely unknown to citizens of the Great Lakes State. That lack of familiarity is unfortunate, for the location should be easily identifiable to every Michigander.
Philadelphia is home to Independence National Historical Park, where the National Park Service proclaims that the unlikely dream of a free country of independent citizens became fact. The hall replicated at Dearborn’s Greenfield Village is featured in the park, along with the Liberty Bell and Benjamin Franklin’s grave. The declaration of 1776 issued forth from there. It is hallowed ground for our nation.

Michigan possesses a comparable site: Capitol Park in downtown Detroit. On this ground, in the early 19th century, democratic self-government was planted and took root. Here is where Michigan’s first constitution—leading with the revolutionary axiom that “All political power is inherent in the people”—was authored and tendered to the electorate. Here is where its first capitol stood tall. Here is where Michigan first assumed its full and equal station in the union of American states. Here is where escapees from human bondage found shelter and first glimpsed freedom. And here is still found the grave of Michigan’s first governor. It, too, is hallowed ground.

One of the smallest public spaces at the heart of Michigan’s largest city, Capitol Park is a half-acre triangle formed by the junction of Griswold, State, and Shelby streets. The diminutive size belies the wealth of heritage it holds. Its shape derives from Augustus Woodward’s street plan of hubs and spokes upon which Detroit was rebuilt after an 1805 fire burned the town to rubble. Similar to Pierre L’Enfant’s design for Washington, D.C., the Woodward plan scrapped a grid system in favor of broad boulevards with intersecting avenues that created special shapes like Grand Circus Park, Campus Martius, and what was called Harmonie Park on the east side of downtown. The plan called for the seat of territorial government to be located at the triangle on a block just north of Michigan Avenue, west of Woodward Avenue.

As a constituent part of the Northwest Territory from 1805 to 1837, Michigan’s government apparatus differed significantly from that of today. Detroit was the capital, and a unicameral body called the Territorial Council exercised legislative authority for the people. Such authority was, however, circumscribed and divorced from direct influence by the public. The president of the United States appointed many of the council’s members, and its enactments were subject to veto by Congress. Michigan sent a single, nonvoting delegate to the U.S. House of Representatives, who acted as the voice of the territory in the national legislature. No one represented it in the U.S. Senate.

Michigan needed statehood to achieve full self-government and a fully representative democracy. Once the territory possessed the requisite population, it could
petition for entry into the union. That process began in earnest on May 11, 1835, when a constitutional convention met in Detroit at the territorial capitol on the triangle of land at Griswold and Shelby. The cornerstone for the brick building—designed by Obed Wait—had been laid in 1823, and the structure was completed five years later. Its Greek Revival design was hailed by a contemporary newspaper writer as “a superb ornament to Detroit, the rising metropolis of Michigan.” From its tower, an observer could view the river that gave the town its name. By the time the delegates concluded their session and departed the structure on June 24, they had adopted a proposed constitution for submission to the people. The document was approved at an election held that October, by a vote of 6,752 to 1,374.

When statehood came to Michigan on January 26, 1837, the “superb ornament” was converted into the first state capitol. Under the constitution of 1835, the structure provided offices and meeting rooms for the three co-equal branches of government. The fundamental law under which free people would live and govern themselves in Michigan took shape here. The state’s first governor, 25-year-old Stevens Thomson Mason, took his oath of office here; he retains the distinction as youngest governor in American history. His leadership was critical in the effort for statehood: calling for the census to be taken; calling the convention into session; and calling Michiganders to support the constitutional document. Here the legislature held its very first session.

The constitution transformed the building into the state capitol, but it also served as the impetus for another change in the building’s status. A provision required that, no later than 1847, the legislature would designate a permanent location for the seat of government. Detroit’s location, across from Canada, posed a risk of invasion. The decision to situate the capital safely in the interior meant a new capitol would rise elsewhere in the state. The Detroit structure had to find a new purpose once it was abandoned by lawgivers.

Civic leaders determined that education would be its best principal use. It became an institution of public learning known as the Capitol Union School, serving as Detroit’s first high school as well as its public library. Mid-century came, and an adjacent structure served in a different role on behalf of human freedom. Tailor Seymour Finney purchased a lot on Griswold across from the old capitol in 1850 and opened on it the Finney Hotel and horse barn. The barn became a “passenger depot” on the Underground Railroad; for a decade, it served as a hiding place for runaway slaves attempting to cross the Detroit River to freedom in Canada.

On a cold January night in 1893, disaster struck the old capitol (then dramatically altered by a Second Empire-style addition at the front). By the time firefighters arrived, the structure was engulfed in flames and a total loss.

For seven decades it had served the public well, but not all were saddened by the burned-out shell. Within a month, the Detroit Free Press sounded a call for the site to be made into a greenspace rather than rebuilt. The idea caught hold, and the grounds were redesigned into a public park featuring plantings, benches, and a fountain in a
Within a decade, a movement began to make the park into more than just a site for city recreation. Michigan rallied around the proposition of elevating the space into a place of honor where its first governor—who had died in New York at the age of 32—would be buried and properly commemorated. In 1905, his remains were brought home and reinterred in an elaborate ceremony featuring leaders in state and local government. Above Mason’s grave, the state erected a statue of bronze made of cannons from Fort Michilimackinac. The park became named for the structure that had once stood there, where the governor had governed and where representative government had come to Michigan.

In the second decade of the 20th century, office towers designed by Albert Kahn and other noted architects began to encircle the public space, accentuating its special character. The Farwell Building opened on Capitol Park on March 8, 1915. The interior design was the province of Louis Comfort Tiffany, and its brass and marble elevators were unequaled in the city. The vaulted dome in the lobby was inlaid with thousands of Tiffany glass pieces. The Kahn-designed Griswold Building across from the park was constructed and opened in 1929. Other structures included the home of Detroit Savings Bank (now Comerica Bank)—simply known as 1212 Griswold—at the northeast corner of Griswold and State. Built in 1895, it is the oldest existing “high rise” (12 floors) in Detroit, and later served as the Chamber of Commerce building until becoming headquarters for the United Way. The David Stott Building, named for a prosperous miller, also opened in 1929 at the southeast corner of Griswold and State.

As the middle of the 20th century arrived, Detroit hit its heyday. The population approached 2 million, and a new civic center near the riverfront represented a bright future for the ever-growing Motor City. Streetcars that had carried riders to and from Capitol Park were replaced by modern buses. The urban design theory of the 1950s called for converting the site into a public transport center, with a comfort station and four bus loading shelters. One obstacle loomed: Mason’s grave in the footprint of the old central pool.

Above: Stevens T. Mason served in the Detroit capitol until 1840. Courtesy of the Bentley Historical Library, University of Michigan. Left: His remains and statue were relocated within the park in 2010. Courtesy of James M. Gray.
capitol inconveniently occupied the central area of the park. The statue and grave were relocated in late 1955 to the southeast tip of the triangle.

In the 1970s, as Detroit struggled to survive the turbulence of the previous decade, Sunnie Wilson—one of Detroit’s most storied African-American entrepreneurs—opened a nightclub called “Sunnie’s Celebrity Room” across from the park. Improvements were applied to the triangle itself, including raised flowerbeds and other landscape features. These efforts, however, did not succeed in stemming the tide of disinvestment. The nearby Book Cadillac Hotel shut its doors in late 1984. The Farwell, like so many office spaces in Detroit, struggled to hold onto tenants and closed the same year. Detroit continued to lose population, and downtown vacancy levels rose. The promise of urban renewal had evaporated.

By the turn of the 21st century, the park’s adjacent buildings were vacated and the nightclub closed. Though the site still served as a transportation center, it had also become the province of drug dealers and a sorry sight to those who dared to discover its heritage.

Then, in 2001, the tide began to turn. Coincident with the tricentennial of Detroit’s founding, comprehensive plans were unveiled for the redesign of Campus Martius and surrounding open spaces. Within a few years, much of the central business district enjoyed new signage, streetscapes, and renovation. Reconstruction of Capitol Park began in 2009, soon after the opening of the Rosa Parks Transit Center a couple of blocks away negated the need for the park to serve as a bus stop. Within a year, fresh concrete, pavers, and plantings combined with new benches and tables to freshen the look of a once-beautiful oasis. Proper honor was given to Governor Mason’s remains. Although there
was some difficulty in pinpointing the precise location of his grave, Mason’s coffin was removed, cared for by the same funeral home that had performed such service in the 1950s, and reinterred in a more appropriate central location along Griswold Avenue.

Without a corresponding revival of the rest of the area, the park might not have been expected to thrive. Positive developments have created hope on that score. In 2008, the Book Cadillac reopened under the Westin Hotels banner after a multimillion-dollar renovation. State and local land banks acquired the Farwell and 1145 and 1212 Griswold structures in 2010 and issued a request for redevelopment proposals in August 2011. The David Stott Building gained a new lease on life after its acquisition by a developer who opened a martini bar there. In the words of Detroit News architecture writer Michael Hodges, Capitol Park is evolving into “one of Detroit’s coolest urban spaces in large part because of its irregular shape, and the unusual sense of enclosure the building walls provide.”

Today, the park features the Finney Barn state historical marker along with a companion unveiled during Mason’s bicentennial celebration that tells the story of the site and Michigan’s first capitol. A stainless-steel maquette reveals to visitors the portico, Ionic columns, and tower that rose 140 feet over the streets below. The governor’s crypt is sealed with a black granite cover on which is inscribed the state coat of arms. More interpretive signage is planned, and a website has been launched (www.boyguv.com) to elaborate on the park’s history.

All that remains is for today’s generation of Michiganders to pay proper veneration to this landmark of their liberty and to pass on to future generations a Capitol Park that they deserve.

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In 1999, a district comprised of Capitol Park and 17 surrounding structures was successfully nominated for inclusion in the National Register of Historic Places: “the official list of the nation’s historic places worthy of preservation.” In the nomination’s statement of significance, the author notes that the architecture “represents the best of the outgoing stylistic trends of the late 19th century and the modern aesthetic of the 20th century, as well as the radical change in construction techniques brought about by the use of reinforced concrete and steel.” Among the design firms associated with these buildings were Albert Kahn Associates, Malcolmson and Higginbotham, Smith, Hinckman and Grylls, and Spier and Rohns.

The compact district—bounded roughly by Grand River, Woodward, and Michigan avenues and Washington Boulevard—includes examples of nine styles of architecture, from Romanesque to Colonial Revival. One of the jewels is the David Stott Building at 1150 Griswold Street. The Detroit architectural firm of Donaldson and Meier designed this Art Deco structure, which favorably compares to the similarly styled Guardian Building. Situated upon a reddish granite base, the Stott Building’s brick cladding changes in color from tan-orange to buff as it rises to the sky.