

Testimony in Support of Creating a Memorial Honoring the Lives of Fallen Capitol Construction Workers

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Chairman Patrick Zollner, Senator Bowers and Senator Blasi, Representative Winn and Representative Borjon, and all of the Capitol Preservation Committee appointees, members of the Kansas State Historical Society and Kansas State History Museum, your hard-working support staff:

Thank you for the opportunity to testify before you in support of creating a memorial in the memory of the fallen workers who died in the construction of and the maintenance of our Kansas State Capitol. Over the years I have attended many memorial services here at the Kansas State Capitol for fallen law enforcement officers, who have a memorial dedicated to their memory on the Northeast section of the Capitol grounds. These annual ceremonies are very meaningful and ensure that their sacrifices are never forgotten. Spread throughout the grounds are a number of other memorials that pay tribute to the memories of other great Kansans, from Senators Bob Dole and Nancy Kassebaum to Alf Landon, the Pioneer Women of Kansas, a Veteran's Memorial and more. This is all well and good, and as it should be.

However, I believe there is a group of Kansans who lost their lives in the service to our State and the Capitol itself that are just as deserving of a permanent memorial here on the grounds of the Kansas State Capitol: The construction workers who died while building and maintaining the Capitol building.

Through the hard work and dedication of Ms. Donna Casement with the State Library of Kansas we have been able to compile records of eight of the nine workers we believe have died so far while building and maintaining the Capitol. These efforts led to the introduction of a resolution on the floor of the Senate in March of 2023 recognizing their sacrifices. This resolution also gets it right, noting that these workers completed their work "...at dizzying heights with heavy machinery and little to no safety precautions." They were working in conditions that would no longer be acceptable today. To get an idea of the challenges these workers faced, I would invite everyone on the committee, in the gallery, or watching online from home to take one of the free guided tours to the top of the dome. From the relative safety of the spiral staircase leading up to the cupola you will see their craftsmanship is still holding strong today. You can actually touch the same iron beams they constructed, while looking out across the city from those same dizzying heights. Their work has survived numerous lightning strikes and even a passing tornado.

But then, while you are up there, I would invite you to look down. Look down from that height and imagine the unforgiving consequences of just one slipped wrench, one tipped wheel barrow, one failed piece of scaffolding. Imagine trying to climb down the exposed beams, slipshod scaffolding, and wooden ladders at the end of a long day. Imagine how unforgiving their jobs were and imagine falling to your death through a skylight or into the rotunda below. I am confident anyone who takes this tour to the top of the dome will then feel the same as I do- that the time to permanently memorialize their deaths has long since come to pass.

Today, I would ask the Capitol Preservation Committee to recognize these workers with one of three possible memorials to their deaths. A framed entry in the existing exhibit dedicated to the construction of the Capitol that is currently on display in the new Visitor's Center below us. There are already excellent photos of the conditions they worked under, and even a photo some of the workers themselves. It is not unlikely that some of the workers who would go on to die might very well be captured in that picture. This would be the perfect place to hang a frame alongside of these photos with the names, dates, and descriptions of their deaths. Or perhaps a framed exhibit placed in the dome itself where hundreds of brave Kansans, tourists, and schoolchildren climb past every day would also see it and take a moment to imagine what it took to build this in the 1800s would have been. Finally, here are still numerous empty places remaining for bronze plaques set in the walkways around the Capitol. One of these bronze plaques set in one of the walkways with a view of the Capitol rising before them would also be meaningful and appropriate.

Thank you for the opportunity to testify before you today. I also have the honor roll of the names, dates, and descriptions of the deaths with me today and attached to my written testimony. I know this hearing has likely run longer than usual already, but I believe it would be a meaningful experience to read them into the record.

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- Young Campbell** 1886 Fell from the scaffolding when his wheelbarrow tipped.
- A 58yr old stone mason from Topeka, Kansas, Campbell would be the first known worker to die during the construction of the Capitol. Married with seven children, Campbell died in a fall after the wheelbarrow he was using to move heavy stones along the narrow scaffolding tipped.
- Major Hiram W. Jones** 1887 Struck by falling stone and cable when derrick collapsed.
- A 67yr old time keeper from Lawrence, Kansas, Major Jones died when scaffolding supporting the original horse-drawn block, tackle, and derrick system collapsed. Major Jones was struck by falling stone and a cable. Jones was married with three children and is buried in the Oak Hill Cemetery in Lawrence, Kansas.
- William “Billy” Cullins** 1888 Fell when scaffolding collapsed.
- A 24yr old machinist from Vermont, Cullins died in a scaffolding collapse. Cullins was to have been married in five days. He is buried in the historic Topeka Cemetery.
- Charles Ewing Howell** 1889 Fell through the roof of the South Wing.
- A 23yr old iron worker from Leavenworth, Kansas’ Howell died after falling through the roof of the South Wing. Howell is buried in the Mount Muncie Cemetery in Lansing, Kansas.
- Jack Williams** 1890 Fell climbing down from the new electric motor winch at the end of the day.
- A 21yr old electric motor operator from Topeka, Kansas, Williams operated the new electric winch that replaced the horse-drawn block and tackle that had collapsed. Williams fell from the uppermost scaffolding when trying to climb down the scaffolding at the end of the workday.
- John Cave** 1890 Fell off the outside of dome when his wrench slipped.
- A 24yr old iron worker from Scottsville, Cave was sitting astride of the outer rim of the dome, tightening a bolt with a wrench so large it required the use of both of his hands. The wrench slipped, and Cave fell off the outside of the dome through the skylight of the North Wing. Cave was married with children.
- Myrtie Deegan** 1890 Fell from the dome to the rotunda below.
- A 48yr old iron worker from Topeka, Kansas, Deegan was working inside the dome when he stepped on a loose, round piece of iron and fell into the rotunda below. Deegan was married with two children.
- Unknown** 1890 Newspapers of the day indicate another death may have occurred in 1890.
- Raymond R. Davids** 1950 Fell while sandblasting the masonry supporting the dome.
- A 25yr old from Kansas City, Missouri, Raymond R. Davids fell from the outside of the dome onto the roof of the West Wing. Davids had been working for Chamberlin Company of America, who had been contracted by the State of Kansas to sandblast the exterior masonry surfaces of the Capitol.