The story of Bulfinch's appointment as Architect of the Capitol begins with a visit to the ruins of the capitol building in 1817. At that time he met with President James Monroe who complained of the slow construction, and later returned the gesture by visiting Boston to admire its beautiful architecture and urban design. After Benjamin Henry Latrobe resigned from the post, Bulfinch applied to the office and was quickly accepted. Bulfinch made good use of his time in Washington, finishing construction of the capitol building and its grounds, consulting on several other government projects, and designing the first Unitarian church in D.C. along with a federal penitentiary.

"The happiest years of my life in pursuits congenial to my taste, and where my labors were well received." - Charles Bulfinch

Bulfinch held the position of Architect of the Capitol from January 1818 to June 1829. As Architect, he was dedicated to the development and maintenance of the capitol complex in Washington D.C. Bulfinch's main duty was the construction of the Capitol Building, with drawings inherited from its previous architects and designers, William Thornton and Benjamin H. Latrobe. The Capitol building was finished during Bulfinch's tenure as Architect and his personal touches, although limited by orders to stay true to Thornton's designs, can be seen in the western portico, the old Library of Congress, the original dome and grounds.

The cornerstone of the Capitol Building was laid in 1793 under the direction of President George Washington. During Latrobe's tenure as Architect of the Capitol, construction had been hampered by the War of 1812, which left the semi-complete building in ruins after it was burnt by the British. Construction was also stagnated due to Latrobe's personal and political disagreements. Bulfinch inherited these ruins when Latrobe resigned his post in 1817 due to severe disagreement with the Commissioner.

The scheme was grand and daunting for Bulfinch but despite any doubts he might have had; he restored the north and south wings and completed the chambers of the Supreme Court, the House and the Senate. Bulfinch altered the plans of the west portico in order to accommodate more rooms and to prevent the rotunda from being cut up into smaller spaces for this purpose. A storm of disagreement over the height of the dome brought Bulfinch his first taste of the arguments which Latrobe had faced. However, Bulfinch's professionalism smoothed the way for agreement and he completed the dome by 1824. His plan for a low neo-classical dome was met by a demand for a tall gothic dome by the Cabinet. Bulfinch conceded with a resulting dome 55 feet high.

The happiest years of my life in pursuits congenial to my taste, and where my labors were well received.

- Charles Bulfinch

Bulfinch gatehouse at 17th Street and Constitution Avenue

Bulfinch's Whitehouse design c.1828

Courtesy Library of Congress

Bulfinch's Whitehouse design c.1828

Courtesy Library of Congress

Bulfinch's Gatehouse at 17th Street and Constitution Avenue

President James Monroe

Courtesy Wikimedia Commons

Interior dome drawing by Bulfinch

Courtesy Library of Congress

Interior dome drawing by Bulfinch

Courtesy Library of Congress

Latrobe Capitol before the British destruction

Courtesy Library of Congress

New dome reconstruction c.1856

Courtesy Library of Congress

New dome reconstruction c.1856

Courtesy Library of Congress

Capitol grounds c.1825

Courtesy Wikimedia Commons

Capitol grounds c.1825

 Courtesy Wikimedia Commons