

The Spiral Staircases

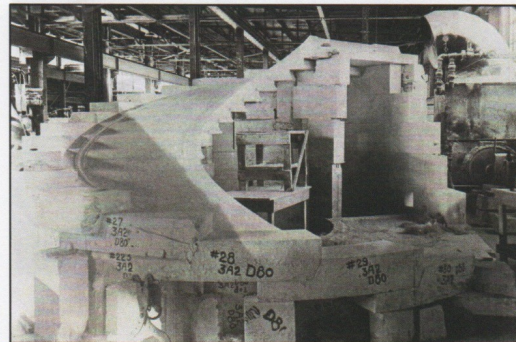
INFORMATION SHEET

Among the interesting architectural features of the Supreme Court Building are two, self-supporting, elliptical marble staircases. Whether Cass Gilbert, the building's architect, chose to include them for practical reasons or simply for their visual beauty is not known.



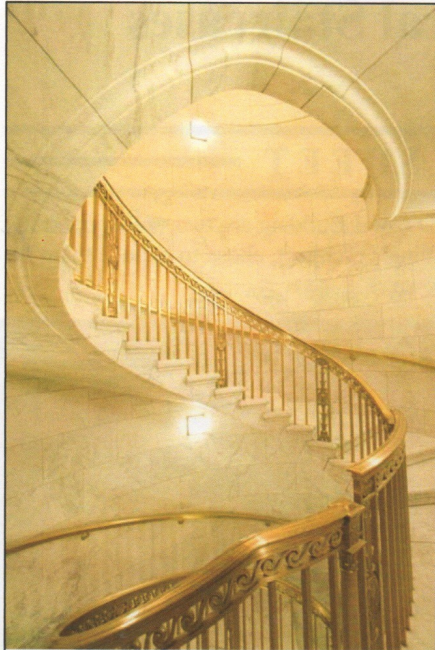
Looking down from the third floor.

The marble for the staircases was quarried by the Moretti-Harrah Marble Company near Sylacauga, Alabama. The rough blocks were transported to Knoxville, Tennessee, where the Gray-Knox Marble Company finished the stone in their mill. After the steps were cut, the staircase was assembled upside down to make sure that each piece was an exact fit (*right*). In a few places, a run of several steps was cut from one piece of marble. After numbering each piece, the staircases were dismantled and shipped to Washington for installation.



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A view from the third floor.

Each of the staircases has 136 steps that complete seven spirals while ascending five stories from the basement to the third floor. The cantilevered design of the staircases eliminates the need for a central support as each step is anchored into the marble wall on one end and rests upon the step below it. The staircases, therefore, are held in place by fit and pressure rather than mortar and steel.

On each floor's landing, bronze door frames are decorated with neoclassical motifs, including leaves, urns, and anthemia (floral decorations). In addition, four law related themes repeat: a **lamp** representing knowledge, a **book** inscribed with "LEX," the Latin word for law, an **owl** symbolizing wisdom, and the **Scales of Justice** symbolizing impartiality (*bottom right*). The bronze balustrades for the stairs are adorned with a classical wave pattern, rosettes, and oval medallions featuring an **eagle**, a symbol of the United States (*bottom left*).

While the staircases are not open for public use, they may be viewed from two landings on the ground floor of the building. They are a lasting testament to the precision and formal elegance of Cass Gilbert's design for the Supreme Court Building.

