



A Self-Guided Tour of the Cathedral Exterior

THE WEST FAÇADE

Welcome to Washington National Cathedral, officially known as the Cathedral of St. Peter and St. Paul. The cornerstone was laid in 1907 and the “final finial” was placed in 1990. Constructed of Indiana limestone, it is a modern Gothic Episcopal cathedral whose doors are open to people of all faiths. Set on fifty-nine acres on Mount St. Alban, the Cathedral is the highest point in Washington. It is the sixth largest cathedral in the world. The Cathedral was built entirely by the gifts and donations of many people, and receives no church or government support.

The west façade, sometimes called the front, consists of two towers, a gallery halfway down, a rose window, a three huge portals or doorways with a large tympanum carved above each.

1 On the north (left as you look at it) is the tower of St. Peter, which rises 232 feet in the air. Each tower has four huge pinnacles which contain 2,700 carved stones. On the south (right) is the tower of St. Paul. The last stone laid in the Cathedral is a cross-shaped stone called a finial. It is on the southwest corner and was placed there by a crane during a ceremony in 1990.

2 Below the towers is a row of seventy windows which mark the Pilgrim Observation Gallery. This level is reached by elevators (and stairways not open to the public), and provides a breathtaking view of the City of Washington and surrounding regions.

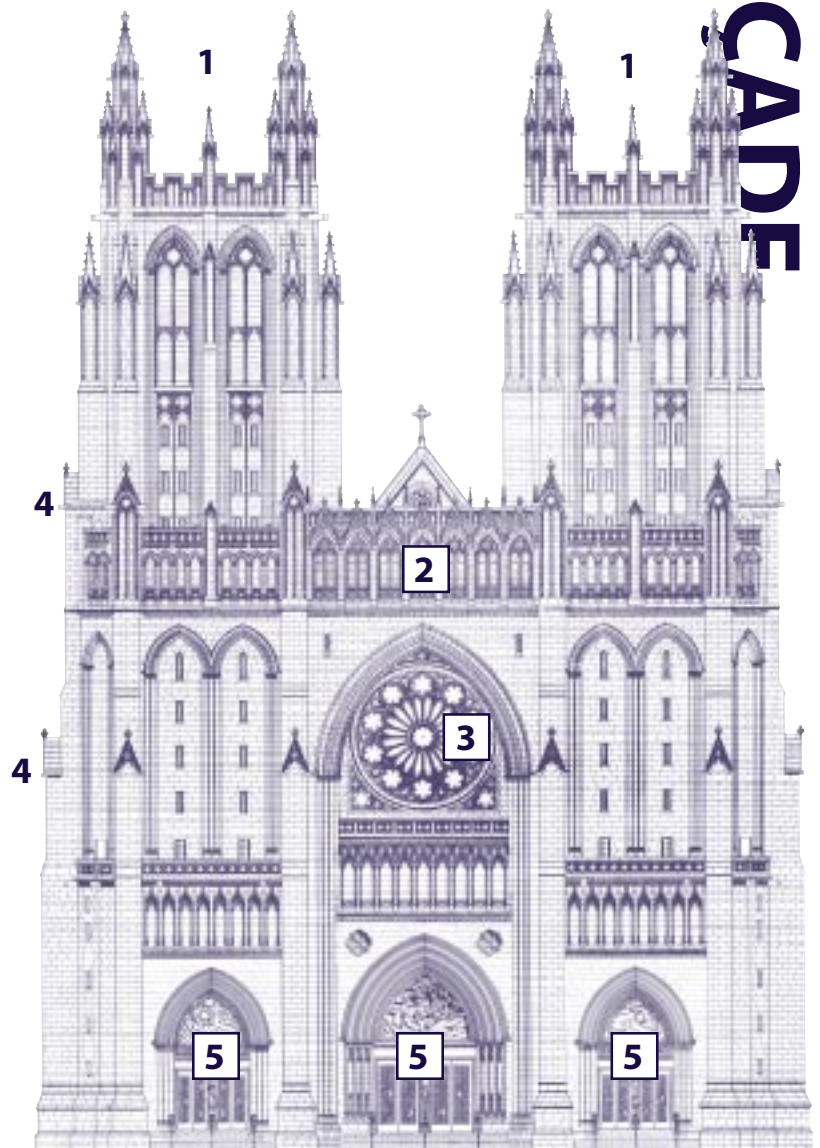
3 Best seen from inside, in the center of the façade is the magnificent west rose window by artist Rowan LeCompte. Over 10,500 pieces of glass depict the biblical passage, “Let there be light!”

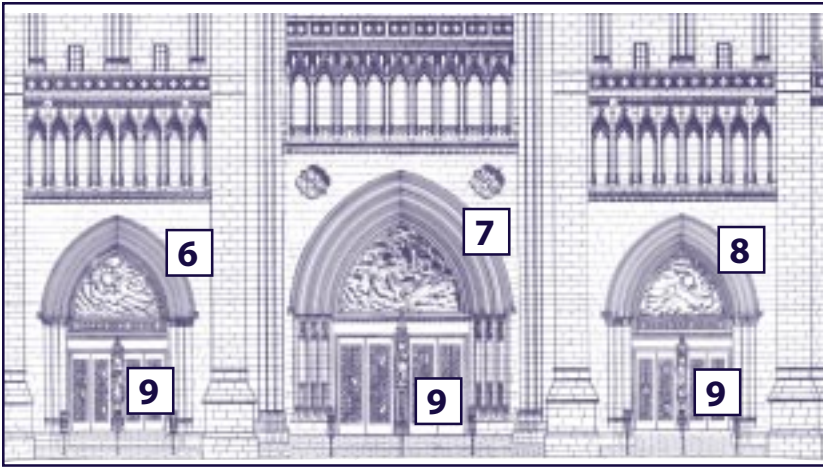
4 The carvings which extend from the walls are figures that are either gargoyles or grotesques. These carvings deflect rain water away from the walls of the building. Gargoyles are part of the guttering system and expel water through their mouths; grotesques simply shed water from their noses, lips or ears. Both are often carved in the form of imaginative or amusing people or creatures.

The overall theme for the west façade is Creation. When this theme was chosen, it was a revolutionary concept for a cathedral entrance. In medieval times, Gothic cathedrals would traditionally depict messages of judgement and death on this entrance, with judges, prophets, kings and martyrs.

5 The three main doors are called portals. The space above a portal within the arch is called a tympanum, and is a space for carving. The space between two doors in one of the portals is called a trumeau. It took three carvers two years and two months to carve all of the sculpture around the portals. The sculptor of these figures is the renowned artist Frederick Hart, who began his career as a Cathedral stone carver.

The tour continues on reverse.





Detail of the west portals

6 In the tympanum above the north portal is carved *Creation of Day*. In the trumeau below is a statue of St. Peter, the fisherman, with his fishing net over his shoulder. The sculptor chose to depict him at the exact moment Peter was called by Jesus to be a disciple.

7 In the tympanum above the center portal is a carving representing the creation of humankind. Called *Ex Nihilo*, which translates as “out of nothing,” this carving dramatically shows life emerging from the void. Partially formed figures of men and women seem to be emerging from the swirling background. On the trumeau in the central portal is a statue of Adam, the first man. Adam is also shown emerging from the stone that surrounds him, not quite fully formed.

8 In the tympanum above the south portal is carved *Creation of Night*. In the trumeau below is a statue of St. Paul. He is depicted at the moment of his conversion to Christianity, when he was temporarily blinded by the power of God.

9 The cast bronze door are unique and welcoming in contrast to heavy wooden doors like those of the Cathedral’s south transept. The are each eight feet wide and fifteen feet tall, created by the lost wax method by German artist Ulrich Henn. They depict events both in the lives of the Old Testament patriarchs Moses and Abraham (center), and the lives of St. Peter (north) and St. Paul (south), as well as the flowers of North and South America.

You may wish to continue your exploration of the exterior by exploring these elements of Gothic architecture:

The Cathedral is built in the style of fourteenth century Gothic. It is a completely original design and not a copy of any previously existing building. Philip Hubert Frohman was its prime architect, taking over the design in 1921 and working until his death in 1972. The west façade and towers are considered to be possibly the last pure Gothic construction in the world.

The building is built in the shape of a cross. The building’s skeleton consists of stone pressing against stone; no structural steel is needed for the building to stand. The methods used for building this cathedral vary little from those used to build the great medieval cathedrals of Europe.

All of the chief elements of Gothic architecture are present: pointed arches that permit great height in the interior spaces; ribbed vaulting which permits thinner walls, which in turn allow for taller windows, frequently decorated with stained glass; and flying buttresses that press against the building like giant bookends, taking the weight of the building away from the walls. The building requires no structural steel to stand and is held up by the weight and balance of stone against stone.

Cathedral Facts and Figures

Length	517 feet east-to-west, approximately the length of two football fields or the height of the Washington Monument
Weight	150,000 tons
Seats	approximately 4,000 people
Visitors annually	approximately 560,000 people
Worshippers annually	approximately 220,000 people