WASHINGTON, D.C. — They stand here eruditely, in a meadow, on a hill, in the far outer reaches of the monumental capital city. Twenty-80 Corinthian columns, abandoned from the U.S. Capitol when it was enlarged some 30 years ago, have been resurrected and re-arranged on a grassy knoll in the National Arboretum.

The National Capitol Columns, as they are called, are not quite a ruin, but neither are they a celebration. Arranged almost as they were when they stood at the Capitol, they suggest a portico or a colonnaded chamber, and are reminiscent of some place else, some time else — perhaps the Capitol itself in an era when government and architecture, we much more accessible to ordinary people.

The columns surround a terrace of marble blocks that were removed from the Capitol steps during the same expansion, and whose chipped and worn edges betray their age. Burs of thyme are planted in the gap between these blocks, giving the assemblage an unkempt look. The names of those who contributed to this $2 million project are carved in the marble, subtly reminding us of the financial limitations of our national government.

Because of their imprudent location, one cannot separate the presence of the columns from the reason they are here. They were shot from the Capitol facade because they could not support a new, enlarged pediment that was installed, and were left to languish. They were rescued through the persis-