
CHAPTER VIII

HISTORY OF THE ARCHITECTS OF THE CAPITOL

DR. WILLIAM THORNTON, architect [Plate 129], a West Indian, was one of the first as well as one of the most interesting of the pioneers of the profession in this country.¹ His family were prominent among the Friends in England. His parents moved to the island of Tortola, in the West Indies, in 1761. Here Thornton was born, May 27 of the same year. At this period either Thornton's father or uncle was governor of the island.

When 5 years old Thornton was sent to England to be educated. He studied medicine under Dr. Feld, and with the noted Dr. Brown, of Edinburgh. In that city he graduated in medicine in 1784. His studies were continued in Paris, and there an intimate friendship was formed with the noted Countess Beauharnais, a relative of Empress Josephine's first husband. She was an authoress and held a famous salon. Thornton traveled extensively on the continent of Europe with Count Audriani, the naturalist, after which he came to this country and formed a temporary residence in Philadelphia. In 1790 he married the daughter of Mrs. Ann Brodeau, a successful school-teacher of Philadelphia. Mrs. Thornton, who was born in England, was a lady of culture, and an artist of some ability, which is proved by a miniature of her husband in the possession of Mrs. Kennon. After their marriage they returned to Tortola, where Thornton had an interest in the estate of his father. In 1793 he moved to Washington City, where he lived until his death, in 1828. He left no children. Upon his arrival in the city he found it necessary to take a house in Georgetown. Some years afterwards he moved to

1331 F Street, opposite the present Ebbitt House. At this place he and James Madison were neighbors for eight years. Benj. Ogle Tayloe says: "He had a well-earned reputation for letters and taste; . . . he was a wit, a painter, and a poet." Dunlap, whose work was published only a short time after Thornton's death, says: "He was a scholar and a gentleman, full of talent and eccentricity, a Quaker, by profession a painter, a poet, and well acquainted with the mechanics and arts; his company was a complete antidote to dullness."²

Thornton's duties brought him into close relation with such eminent men of his day as Washington, Madison, Jefferson, Randolph, L'Enfant, Adams, Hamilton, and Fulton. He was intimate socially with the Tayloes, Carrolls, Stuarts, Van Nesses, and others who were the features of political and social life at the Federal capital in those days. The acquaintance with Washington ripened into such an intimacy that his home was the President's familiar resort when in the Federal City.

The National Intelligencer of March 29, 1828, as well as the Columbian Institute and the Colonization Societies in memorials on his death, pay a high tribute to his ability, good-fellowship, and philanthropy. The American Philosophical Society conferred the Magellenic gold medal upon him in December, 1792, as a distinction for his book on the elements of written language, which was published in Philadelphia, in 1793, under the title of *Cadmus*. There is an extended review of *Cadmus* in the *Monthly Review* of the year of publication, as well as a note in reference to an article on teaching the dumb. He published

¹A portion of this chapter was based on Brown's article, "Dr. William Thornton, Architect," *Architectural Record* 6 (July–September, 1896): 52–70.

²For quotations, see William Dunlap, *A History of the Rise and Progress of the Art of Design in the United States*, 3 vols. (Boston: C. E. Goodspeed & Co., 1918; new edition, with additions by Frank W. Bayley and Charles E. Goodspeed), vol. 2, 8.

papers on medicine, astronomy, philosophy, finance, government, and art, as well as on language.

According to the *Science Record*, in June, 1810, he published a long defense of Fitch as the inventor of the application of steam to navigation. This pamphlet was reprinted in the *Patent Office Record* in 1850, and is considered an official document of value. As an inventor he claimed, according to Tayloe, to be the first to apply steam to boat propulsion. He was associated with Fitch in his experiments on the Delaware before Fulton commenced his on the Hudson. Brissot describes Fitch running a boat from Philadelphia to Trenton in 1789 by steam, and notes the fact that thousands witnessed the event. In his pamphlet (1810) Thornton claims that Fulton was indebted to him for valuable suggestions, as Fulton saw Thornton's drawings when he visited the Patent Office in 1806. As early as 1788 Rumsey applied for a patent on steamboats, which conflicted with the invention of Fitch. This was proved by Fitch winning the case. Fulton's first patent was not issued until 1809. Thornton claimed that Fulton's death was due to worry caused by the strength of his pamphlet. While in America the first time Thornton was engaged to build steamboats to navigate the Mississippi (before 1790). This scheme fell through for lack of financial aid. Thornton seems to have had greater faith in the future of steamboats than Fulton, who offered to bet the former that a boat could never go more than 5 miles an hour, while Thornton expected a speed of 12 miles.

Another invention which has recently been revived was the conversion of sawdust into planks. Thornton received patents for improvements in steamboats, steam boilers, and condensers. Fernando Fairfax gave him £2,000 for a quarter interest in his patents and manufacturing companies.

As an artist Thornton was more than an amateur. Tayloe mentions a head of Jefferson by King as a copy of a painting by Thornton, and

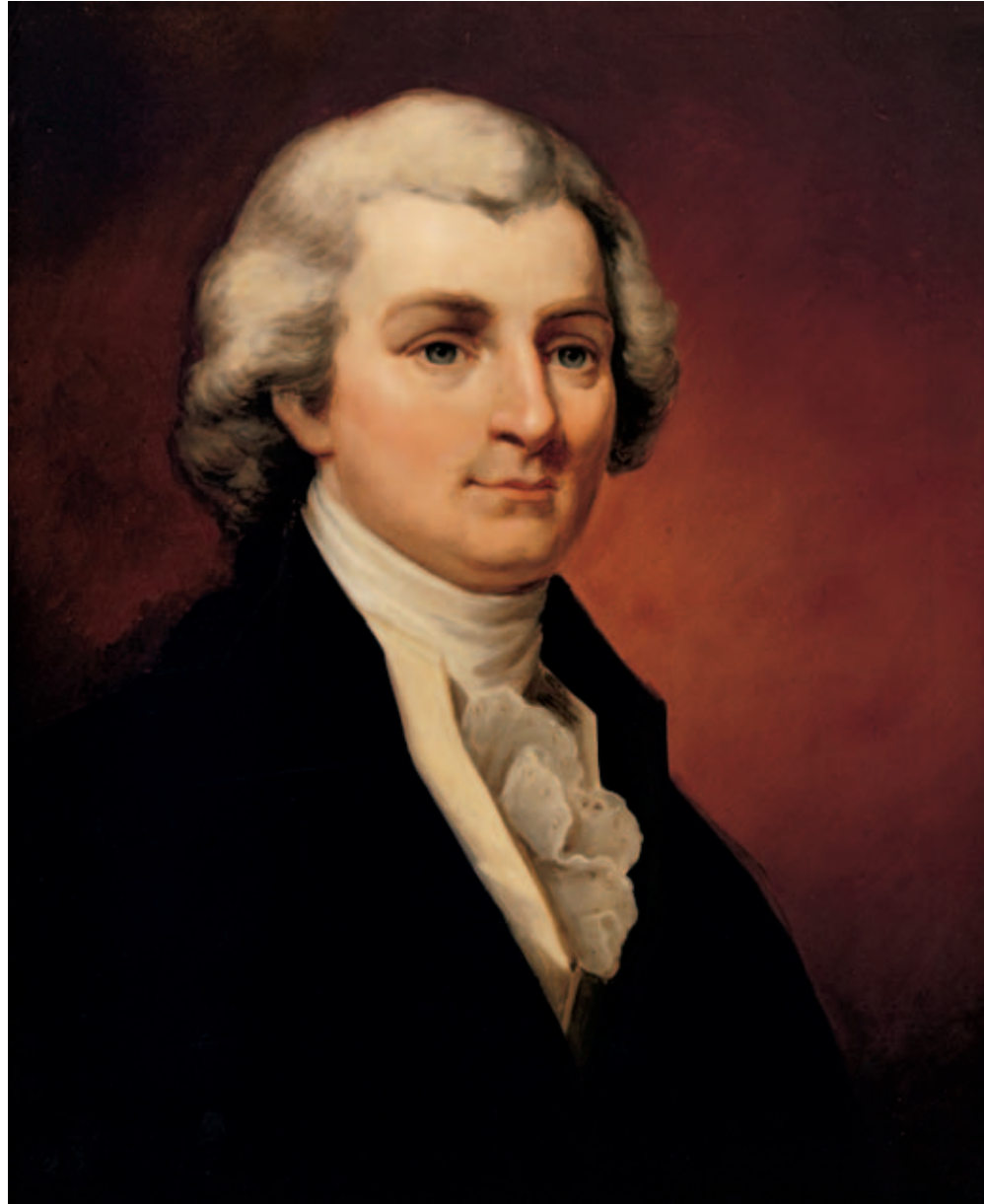
Mrs. Kennon, at present the owner of Tudor House, in Georgetown, who knew Thornton in her childhood, has a miniature of Washington painted by him. Mr. Charles Hoffman, of Frederick, Md., and Mrs. Miller, of Washington, have pieces of his work, among them being a portrait of the Countess of Beauharnais.

Thornton was noted for both philanthropy and bravery. Brissot says: "From conversations with Thornton, although his exterior denotes not the Quaker, yet he professes their principles and practices their morality."³ Brissot gives quite a lengthy account of Thornton's efforts to colonize the negroes in Africa. He went to the expense of sending an agent to Africa to locate a colony. Unfortunately, this vast scheme was not accomplished. He became actively interested in negro colonization as early as 1789, and was until his death a member of the American Colonization Society.

When the British captured Washington, in 1814, an officer ordered a gun turned on the Patent Office building. Thornton rode up and jumped off his horse in front of the gun demanding: "Are you Englishmen or Goths and Vandals? This is the Patent Office, the depository of the inventive genius of America, in which the whole civilized world is concerned. Would you destroy it? If so, fire away and let the charge pass through my body." By this effort the patent records were saved. Thornton carried the Patent Office records to his farm in the country, so that none were lost. He also placed a guard at the Navy-Yard and Capitol during the evacuation.⁴

³ J. P. Brissot de Warville, *New Travels in the United States of America in 1788* (1792; reprint ed., New York: Augustus Kelly, 1970), 167-168.

⁴ This often repeated account first appeared in the diary of Mrs. (Anna Maria) Thornton. "Diary of Mrs. William Thornton: Capture of Washington by the British," *Records of the Columbia Historical Society* 19 (1916): 172-183.



DR. WM. THORNTON, ARCHITECT.

Filippo Costaggini, oil on canvas, 1881, after a miniature in the possession of the Thornton family.

Several instances are on record where in attempting to protect a wife from a brutal husband he in turn found it necessary to defend himself against both wife and husband.

Among his papers are his commissions as lieutenant and captain in the war of 1812.

One of his most intimate friends was John Tayloe, the owner of the Octagon House, probably the most noted producer of race horses in this country. Thornton also kept and raised race horses. He imported fine animals from Barbary and England. His account books show quite a number of blooded stock that were valued at more than \$2,000 apiece. By horses and benevolence he is said to have lost large sums of money.

There are three things that connect Thornton intimately with the history of Washington City and the country, and where the excellent character of his work places the people under obligation to him: First, for his artistic capacity and skill in producing the best scheme for a Capitol, which forms the nucleus of the present structure. Second, for his general culture, breadth, and capacity as one of the Commissioners of the District, which are shown in the execution of the magnificent ideas of Washington and L'Enfant as to streets, and his own and Hoban's ideas as to buildings and grounds. Third, for his mechanical knowledge and executive ability. The Patent Office, which has fostered and encouraged the inventive ability of the country, began under his management.

The Superintendent of Public Buildings and Grounds has quite a number of volumes, embracing early letters concerning the formation of the District of Columbia, the laying out of Washington City, and the erection of the Federal buildings, as well as a complete record of the proceedings of the Commissioners from 1792 to 1802. The history of Thornton's connection with the city and public buildings is to be found in these volumes and in letters in the possession of private parties. By act of Congress of January 4, 1790, the President was authorized to appoint a commission to survey the District, and to purchase, adopt,

and lay out a plan for the Federal City, and prior to the first Monday in December, 1800, they were to "provide suitable buildings for the accommodation of Congress, the President, and the public offices of the United States Government." All their work was subject to the approval of President Washington. The first commissioners, appointed January 22, 1791, were Thomas Johnson and David Carroll, of Maryland, and David Stuart, of Virginia.

On September 16, 1794, Thornton received this commission from President Washington: . . . "I hereby appoint said William Thornton one of the commissioners for surveying the district of territory accepted . . . for the permanent seat of the Government of the United States, . . . with all authority to proceed according to law.

"Given this 12th day of September, 1794, of the Independence of the United States the nineteenth.

"GEORGE WASHINGTON,
"BY EDW. RANDOLPH."

There is nothing in the records to show the time that the commissioners were expected to devote to their duties. This matter was probably left to their own judgment, and they must have had considerable time to devote to private business.

The salary of a commissioner was \$1,600 per annum. After Thornton became a member of the board of commissioners, a decided improvement is evident in their written proceedings and in the business forms and contracts which were introduced in connection with the streets, bridges, and buildings that were in their charge. As they appear in the records after his appointment, Thornton should have the credit for the improvement. The ability of Thornton was appreciated by his contemporaries. Andrew Ellicott, who was doing the field work in laying out the city, sent a letter rejoicing in Thornton's appointment for the good of the streets and buildings, saying: "The former

commissioners were totally ignorant and an easy prey." He warns Thornton to be on his guard. Washington, before retiring from the Presidency, says: "I think the United States are interested in the continuance of you in the service; therefore I should regret if either of you [Thornton, Scott, or White] by resignation should deprive them of assistance which I believe you are able to give."

Thornton's education and disposition caused him to take an active part in all the duties of the commissioners, which consisted in supervising the surveys for the District boundary, and the streets of the city, the subdivision of the squares into lots, the location of Federal buildings, the preparation of maps and their reproduction, obtaining plans for the Federal and the arrangements for temporary buildings and bridges, laying out grounds, the opening of quarries, brick yards and kilns, and lime kilns, the cutting of lumber, and obtaining workmen for brickmaking, quarrying, and stone-cutting, as well as brick and stone masons, carpenters, and laborers. Workmen at this period were obtained by advertisement and negotiation from England, Scotland, France, and different parts of this country.

The commissioners let all contracts and supervised the foremen who obtained the material from the quarry, kiln, or forest, and who superintended the work on streets, buildings, or bridges. In all cases we find Thornton insisting on the necessary grandeur of scale. He puts himself frequently on record as opposed to some of the narrower views of other members of the board. The commissioners, on July 20, 1795, made building regulations for the city. It would be fair to assume that Thornton, being the architect on the board, was the prime mover and preparer of these regulations. The commissioners obtained and disbursed money, bills for even the most trifling objects being submitted for their approval. They attended to the sale and other negotiations in connection with transfers of lots. Thornton was delegated to negotiate a loan in Philadelphia, and another later on in England. In both cases he was successful.

In answer to a letter from Washington concerning a national university, two commissioners write, February 18, 1797: "Dr. Thornton has long had in contemplation to lay before the Executive such a one."

In 1801 the commissioners of the District became offended at some report of Congress which reflected upon their management. By request, a committee of Congress examined their accounts and it was proved that the commissioners had served with perfect integrity. An act, May 1, 1802, abolished the office of the commissioners, their principal work being completed, and the President appointed Thomas Monroe to perform a part of their duties.

Thornton early displayed a talent for drawing. When a lad at school in England, he showed his uncle two £5 notes, asking him to select the one which was best engraved; the selection proved to be one young Thornton had just copied in pen and ink. When or where he prosecuted his architectural studies is not recorded. It has been asserted by some writers that he was simply a dilettante in the profession. The only way in which we can judge of his attainments is by an examination of his work, and a knowledge of the estimation in which he was held by his contemporaries. His drawings show skill in draftsmanship, as well as education and refinement in design. His executed work compares favorably with the best of the period in design and construction. He was trusted in a professional capacity during long periods by such astute men as Washington, Jefferson, Madison, and many others. Adolf Cluss, in an address in 1869, calls him an amateur. J. H. B. Latrobe, in an address delivered before the American Institute of Architects in Washington in 1881, states that Thornton had only two weeks' study in the profession. Trumbull gives him the credit of having studied three months. To have accomplished so much with so little study, he must have been a truly remarkable man.

Washington erected a building on North Capitol street, between B and C streets, Washington, D. C., which at the present time is known

as the Hotel Kenmore. Dr. Thornton was the architect and superintendent, as is shown by letters of Washington. The exterior of the building has been altered and additional stories have been added. Some of the interior work still remains intact and shows the skill and refinement of the architect in detail. An old sketch gives an idea of the exterior of this building as it appeared in 1793.

Montpelier, Orange County, Va., the country residence of James Madison, was another piece of Thornton's work, which in dignity, simplicity, and refinement compares favorably with some of the best modern residences. In a letter to Mrs. M. H. Smith, September, 1830, President Madison says: "The only drawing of my house is that by Dr. William Thornton. It is without the wings now making a part of it."⁵ The interior of Montpelier has been remodeled out of all semblance to its original self.

The Octagon House, Washington City, one of the most interesting old residences in this section of the country, was built by John Tayloe and completed in 1801. George Washington took a lively interest in its erection, as it was by his advice that the owner of the Octagon selected Washington for his home. Thornton was the architect. This house is simple and dignified on the exterior, being built of brick, with sandstone trimmings. The entrance porch has columns with Ionic caps. The plan is peculiarly interesting. The interior work, such as mantels, cornices, pilasters, and doors, is rich, elaborate, refined, and thorough in construction. It is still in an excellent state of preservation, although the house has been indifferently cared for for many years. The doors of the first floor in this house are mahogany. The figures on the parlor mantel are so good that they must have been made by some of the noted

sculptors of that day, possibly Canova or Thorwaldsen.⁶ John Tayloe, being wealthy, could have indulged his taste in such things. This house is interesting also from its historical associations, Madison having occupied it after the White House was burned by the British in 1814.

The Tudor House, Georgetown, D. C., was built about 1810 by a Mr. Peter. Although an imposing old structure, the work does not compare with that shown in the Octagon House. The interest in this house centers in the fact that one of Thornton's original sketches for both plan and elevation is still in existence. The exterior of this house is very nearly in its original condition. In the plan is the elliptical form of room which Thornton first used in his plan of the Capitol. While the exterior of this house is an improvement on the sketch, the alterations in plan, probably to save money, are decidedly inferior to the original.

There are several of Thornton's sketches for private houses in my possession.

He made Jefferson a design for the mace of the State of Virginia, in which he used the rattlesnake as the principal feature, because it is peculiarly American, is peaceful until hurt or aroused for self-defense, and only strikes after giving warning.

He made an elaborate scheme for a Washington Monument, a description and rough sketch of which are among his private papers. The sketch shows a mound of massive natural boulders, on and around which are grouped many typical and natural figures, Washington surmounting the whole.

Among the drawings of Thornton which Mr. Edward Clark presented to the American Institute of Architects is what was evidently his design for the President's House. Thornton wrote from Tortola to the commissioners at that date, 1792, stating that he had made designs in

⁵ Thornton was not involved in the design of Montpelier as Brown implies.

⁶ Tayloe ordered the mantels from Coade Manufactory, Lambeth, England. For a detailed history of the architectural development and construction of the Octagon, see Orlando Ridout V, *Building the Octagon* (Washington: American Institute of Architects, 1989).

conformity with the advertisements soliciting competitive plans for the President's House and the Capitol. In an answer to this letter, November 15, 1792, the commissioners state that the plan for the President's palace had already been selected. This design of Thornton's conforms with the requirements of the advertisement, which suggests a central building and wings, built of brick and stone. Knowing that Thornton made such a design, it will be readily seen that this could not have been prepared for any other purpose. This sketch shows a well-executed wash drawing of good proportion, dignified and simple in its treatment. The alternate flap suggests a decidedly improved form for the wings.

It is difficult to understand the plan of the building from the elevations, although it is clear that official, private, and social duties were each intended to have an apartment to themselves. It is difficult to compare this plan with that of the present structure, of which only the central portion has been erected. The central portion of Thornton's design will compare favorably with the structure as erected.

Thornton's work in connection with the Capitol has been fully described in previous pages of this history. When the board of commissioners was abolished, Thornton was placed in charge of issuing patents.

The first patent legislation occurred in 1790. The Secretaries of War and State and the Attorney-General were authorized to grant patents. It is stated that over the issue of the first patents Jefferson, Secretary of State, Knox, Secretary of War, and Randolph, Attorney-General, would hold special conferences. In 1793 this law was changed, putting the matter in the hands of the Secretary of State. In May, 1802, President Jefferson appointed William Thornton a clerk at \$1,400 per year to take charge of patents. At one period he was given \$2,000 a year as Superintendent of Patents, at the same time acting as justice of the peace (being entitled to certain fees), a commissioner of bankruptcy, and a member of levy court. He was the first to have charge of patents. His salary, with his income from other positions, was supposed to be \$2,400.

Madison urged Congress to give him this amount for his Patent Office work. In 1810 Thornton moved models, records, etc., into Blodgett's Hotel. The Government had purchased this building, located on the north side of E street, between Seventh and Eighth streets. Into the east end of this building the Patent Office was moved. The United States Patent Office and Post-Office remained in this building until the fire of 1836. In the Blue Book of 1821 Thornton is recorded as Superintendent of Patents. Mr. Campbell says: "During many years of his superintendency, he freely exercised his discretion in issuing patents. In a communication to the Secretary of State, January 16, 1818, Thornton defined equities and limitations of a reissue as concisely and luminously as has ever been done by any court or text writer." From Thornton's practice grew the act of July 3, 1832, providing for the reissue of a defective patent. Thornton held this office until his death, March 28, 1828.

When the present Patent Office was being erected, Mrs. Thornton requested Robert Mills, the architect, to put either a niche or bracket in the building for the reception of a bust of Thornton, because he had done so much for the good of this department. No notice seems to have been taken of this request. In 1873 Mrs. Adelaide Talbot, a half niece of Thornton, presented to the Patent Office, a portrait of Thornton by Gilbert Stuart. It hangs in a place of honor in the Commissioner's room [Plate 130].

Thornton is buried in the Congressional Cemetery, under a tomb similar in form to those erected to Senators and Representatives. The President of the United States, members of the Cabinet and of Congress, followed his body to the grave. On his tomb is chiseled his motto, "Deo Spes Meo."⁷

⁷Ironically, his rival Benjamin Henry Latrobe designed Thornton's cenotaph. For modern studies of Thornton's life and work as an architect, see Ridout, *Building the Octagon*; Daniel D. Reiff, *Washington Architecture, 1791-1861: Problems in Development* (Washington: U.S. Commission of Fine Arts, 2d ed., 1977); and Elinor Stearns and David N. Yerkes, *William Thornton: A Renaissance Man in the Federal City* (Washington: American Institute of Architects, 1976).

BENJAMIN HENRY LATROBE, ARCHITECT.

Among the ancestors of Benjamin Henry Latrobe [Plate 131], were the noble family of Boneval, of Languedoc, France. John Henry de la Trobe, who was in the military service of the Prince of Orange, went with the prince to England when William took his seat upon the throne of Great Britain. La Trobe settled in Waterford. A son of his, named Benjamin Latrobe, was a minister and superintendent of the Moravian sect in England. He married Anna Margareta Antes, a Moravian from Pennsylvania, in the United States, who was pursuing her studies in one of the English Moravian schools. Benjamin Henry Latrobe, the subject of this sketch, was one of three sons born of this marriage, being born May 1, 1764, at Fulme, in Yorkshire. At 12 years of age he was sent to a Moravian school in Saxony, where he remained until he went to the University of Leipzig. He left Leipzig in 1785, for the sake of adventure, and joined the Prussian army as a cornet of hussars. While in that command he participated in two severe engagements, being wounded in the second one. He resigned his commission, and after some time spent in travel on the Continent he returned to England in 1786. He first secured a place in the stamp office, but left this in a short time and entered the office of an architect of note, S. P. Cockerell, with whom he remained from 1786 to 1788.

At this period he commenced the practice of his profession on his own account. His first piece of work was Hammerwood Lodge, near East Grimstead, in Sussex, which was the cause of his receiving the commission for a house in Ashdown Park for Mr. Trayton Fuller. In a short time he obtained a good rural practice in Surrey and Sussex, as well as the arrangement of the police offices in the metropolis of London.

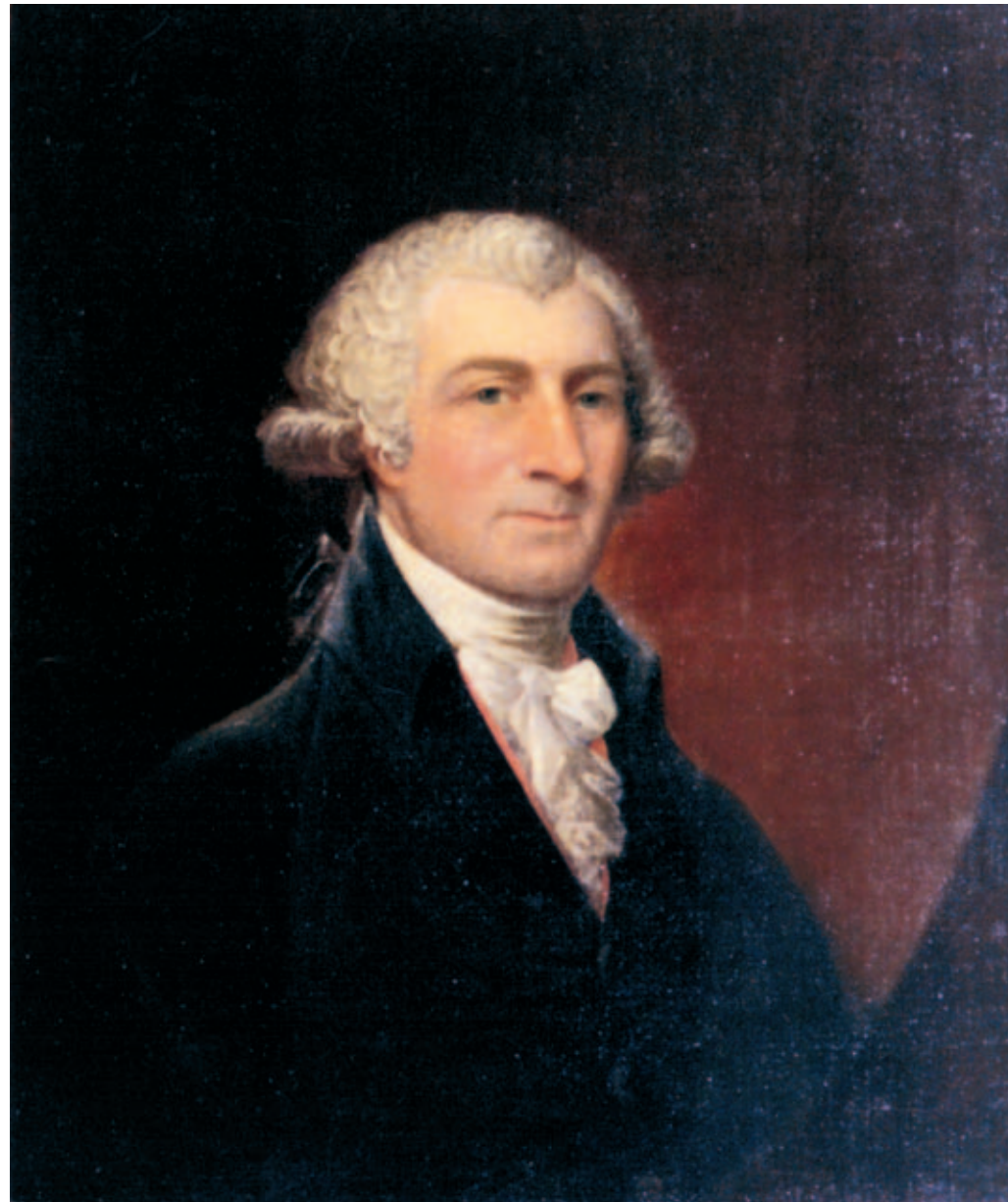
In 1790 he married Miss Lydia Sellon, who died in 1793. Some time after his wife's death, influenced largely by love of adventure as well as his interest in our democratic institutions, he determined to go to the United States. He was not induced to remain in England,

although Lord Barham offered him the surveyorship of the Crown, with a salary of £1,000 per year. He landed in Norfolk March 20, 1796. Soon after landing he met Col. Bushrod Washington, who procured him an introduction to the President. His first work was to improve the navigation of the James River, and his success in this obtained for him the appointment as engineer of the State of Virginia. Leaving Richmond, he went to Philadelphia, Pa., where he was made city engineer and directed the installation of a new water supply. The engine house for this service, which was placed in the center of the principal square, was built with monolithic columns 16 feet in height. He was also employed to repair and improve the works of defense on the coast line as well as to superintend the light-houses.

In 1800 he married a daughter of Isaac Hazelhurst, of Philadelphia. Among other pieces of engineering work he constructed the Chesapeake and Delaware Canal and took an active interest in placing steamboats on Western rivers between the years 1811 and 1815. In 1811 he obtained the exclusive privilege to supply the city of New Orleans, La., with water. When he took charge of the Capitol a second time, in 1815, his son, Henry Latrobe, was left in charge of the work, Latrobe returning to New Orleans in 1818, when he resigned his position on the Capitol.

The architectural work which Latrobe accomplished in this country shows a good education and appreciation of classical forms, but a want of refinement in detail.⁸ Although his drawings show great care

⁸Latrobe is generally regarded by modern architectural historians as a master architect and engineer who studied every facet of a design. Major works discussing Latrobe's career include Talbot F. Hamlin, *Benjamin H. Latrobe* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1955); Paul F. Norton, *Latrobe, Jefferson, and the National Capitol* (New York: Garland, 1977); and John C. Van Horne and Lee W. Formwalt, eds., *The Correspondence and Miscellaneous Papers of Benjamin Henry Latrobe*, 3 vols. (New Haven, Conn.: Yale University Press, 1984-88).



WM. THORNTON BY GILBERT STUART.
United States Patent and Trademark Office.



BENJAMIN H. LATROBE, ARCHITECT.
Filippo Costaggini, oil on canvas, 1881, after Rembrandt Peale.

and exactness in execution, they at the same time show his fondness for construction rather than artistic feeling. His work in connection with the Capitol has already been described in these pages.

Among his notable pieces of work for individuals, States, or corporations may be mentioned the Bank of Pennsylvania, in Philadelphia, which was built of white marble and vaulted throughout. The roof consisted of large blocks of marble, six of which were from 21 to 25 feet long, 5 feet wide, and 1 foot thick. These blocks projected over and formed the cornice of the central attic portion of the building. Latrobe considered this his best piece of architectural work, and thought it gave tone to the architecture of Philadelphia and had its effect in changing the character of architectural work in the whole country. At the time of his death, 1820, the Bank of the United States was being erected in Philadelphia, from his designs, under the direction of William Strickland, a pupil and draftsman of his on the Capitol.⁹ While in Washington he designed St. John's Church, which stands on the corner of Sixteenth and H streets, opposite Lafayette square. In 1812 he designed the Van Ness mansion, one of the notable private residences of the early days in Washington. It was the residence of J. P. Van Ness, a member of Congress from New York, and the son-in-law of Daniel Burns, one of the largest landholders in the new Federal City. He also designed Brentwood, a mansion of dignity and magnitude, in the suburbs of the city, and in 1818 the residence of Commodore Decatur, which is still standing on Lafayette square, but remodeled out of all semblance to its original appearance. The other residences mentioned still remain, but in a dilapidated and abandoned condition. He designed a residence of importance as far west as Cincinnati, and the penitentiary in Richmond,

⁹ Strickland independently designed the Second Bank of the United States in 1818. See William H. Pierson, Jr., *American Buildings and Their Architects: The Colonial and Neo-Classical Styles* (Garden City, NY: Anchor Books Edition, 1976), 434–436.

Va. The Catholic Cathedral in Baltimore is also one of his designs. This is a massive structure with a classical colonnade and a low central dome, and is still used in its original form by the Catholic Church.

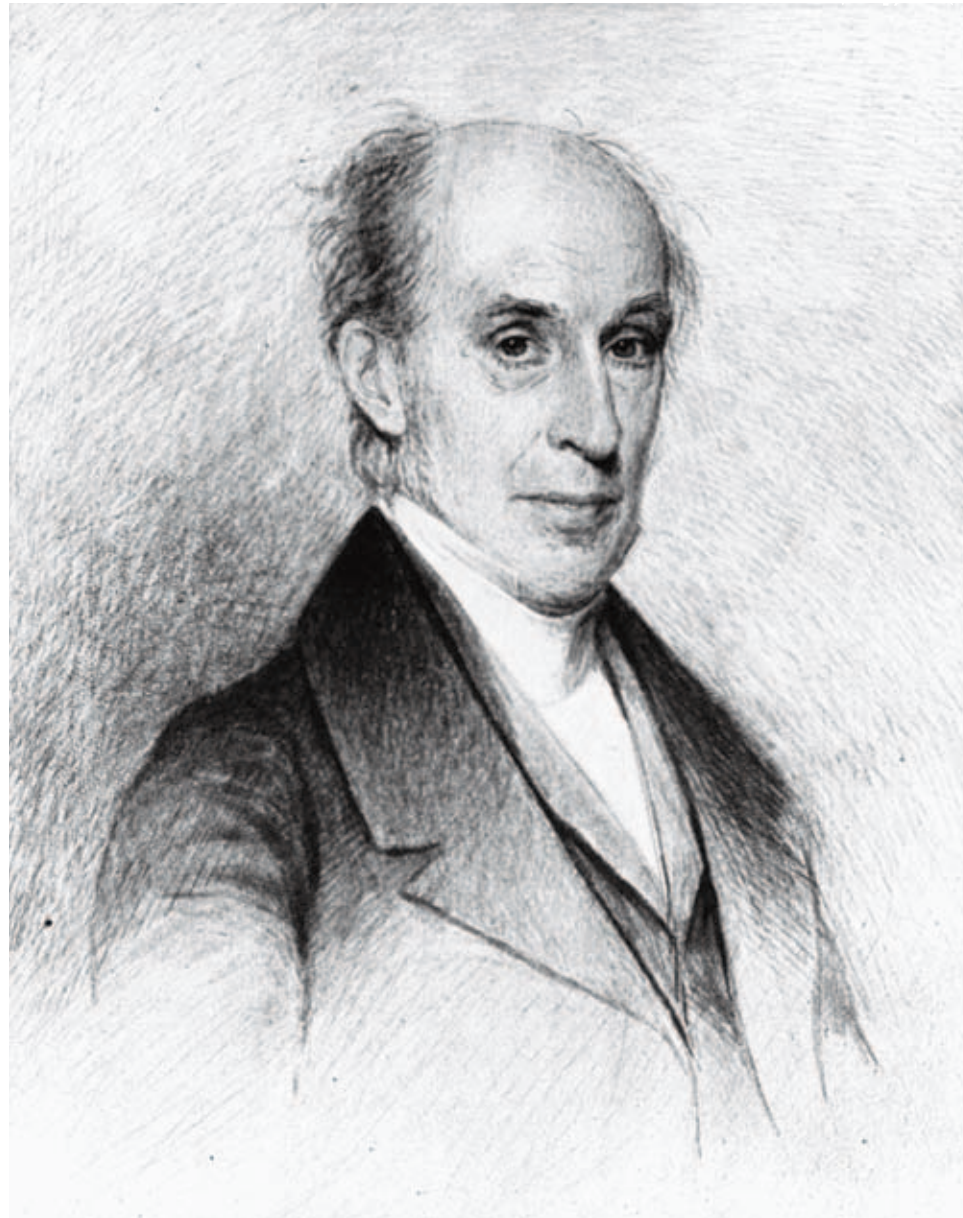
Latrobe was a linguist, speaking and writing several languages, and a clear and forcible writer; a man of unbounded confidence in his own capacity as a constructor and designer, and with little toleration for those who differed with him in such matters. He died from an attack of yellow fever while superintending the construction of the water supply of New Orleans, September 3, 1820.¹⁰

CHARLES BULFINCH, ARCHITECT.

The first one of the Bulfinch family to locate in this country was Aldino Bulfinch, who settled in Boston, Mass., in 1681, where he accumulated wealth and became a prominent citizen. Thomas, the son of Aldino, was educated as a physician in Paris, and practiced his profession with success in Boston. A second Thomas, a son of the one just mentioned, also selected medicine as his profession and was educated in Europe. The latter Thomas Bulfinch was the father of the architect. Charles Bulfinch [Plate 132] was born in 1763, attended school at Harvard, where he graduated when he was 18. He then went abroad to receive his professional training, studying in England. He returned to Boston early in 1786, and was soon enjoying an active practice.

When Bulfinch commenced the practice of architecture, the Adams brothers, and other architects in London, were discussing the treatment of streets as a mass, and this appears to have been among the early

¹⁰ Brown's sources for his biographical sketch of Latrobe included *The Architectural Dictionary*, 8 vols. (London: Architectural Publication Society, 1852–1892); James Q. Howard, "The Architect of the American Capitol," *International Review* 1 (November–December, 1874): 736–753; and *Appleton's Cyclopaedia of American Biography*, vol. 3 (New York: D. Appleton and Company, 1898), 626–628.



CHARLES BULFINCH, ARCHITECT

Frontispiece portrait from Ellen Susan Bulfinch, ed., *The Life and Letters of Charles Bulfinch, Architect* (1896).

problems with which Bulfinch had to deal. He designed a long block of symmetrical buildings, called Franklin Crescent, making the whole street from Hawley to Devonshire streets a curve line, and treating the row as a mass and not as individual buildings. This row of buildings stood from 1793 to 1855, and, judging from descriptions and cuts, must have been very effective with its broad and sweeping curve in connection with the trees and shrubbery of its semioval park. At a later period Bulfinch erected a grouped row of buildings facing the Common.

A large number of churches, probably as great a number as ever fell to one man in this country, were designed and erected under Bulfinch's supervision. Among the more prominent ones I mention the following:

The first Catholic church built in Boston, the Church of the Holy Cross, on Franklin street, was dedicated September 29, 1803. While the erection of the Catholic church was in progress Bulfinch made designs for the "New North," on Hanover street. This church was dedicated May 2, 1804, and was standing in 1890. Neither of these churches had spires, but simple cupolas. In his methods of design he followed closely the style of design used during the same period in England. The church on Hanover street was the only known church of Bulfinch's design standing in Boston in 1890. The only attempt, as far as is known, of Bulfinch in Gothic design was a church on Federal street. The church which was considered the most beautiful in Boston, and which gave Bulfinch his greatest reputation in this line of design, was the New South Church, which stood from 1814 to 1868 on Summer street. It was the first church to be built in Boston of hammered granite. Bulfinch designed a number of churches outside of Boston, a brick one at Lancaster, Mass., and the Unitarian church on the corner of Sixth and D streets NW., Washington, D. C. This has been remodeled by the Government and is now utilized as a police court. The church at Lancaster was built in 1816, and is said to be one of the best examples of his church work which remains.

Bulfinch became most popular throughout New England with State and municipal authorities, and designed the county court-houses and capitols of many counties and States. In 1810 was built the Suffolk County court-house, which was for the latter part of its existence the Boston city hall, the county having provided a new habitation in 1836. It remained until 1862, when it was removed to make way for the new city hall. It is said to have been built of hammered granite and in style resembled the work done in England during the last century. The court-house in Worcester was commenced in 1801, from his designs, and a brick court-house, combined with a town hall, was built in 1805. The Middlesex County court-house, which is still standing in Cambridge, was "built in 1814, enlarged in 1848." The enlargement has so carefully carried out the original design that it is difficult to tell which is Bulfinch's or which the product of the architect who enlarged it, as there is no lack of harmony in the styles on the exterior.

In 1815 University Hall, one of the interesting old buildings of Harvard University, was commenced, under the direction of Bulfinch. He also built a chapel and library for Andover Theological Seminary, which was dedicated September 22, 1818. Another piece of work executed by Bulfinch was the Massachusetts General Hospital, the foundation stone of which was laid in 1818, and the building was opened in 1821. This building was built of granite, had a hexastyle Ionic portico, with pediment which extended two stories in height, and in the center was a low and, judging from illustrations, an inartistic dome. This building was, by some, considered superior in effect to the Massachusetts state capitol. He built the asylum at Somerville, the almshouse at Salem, and a State prison at Charlestown, Mass.

Two statehouses, one among Bulfinch's earlier pieces of work and the other his last, are interesting. The Massachusetts statehouse was finished in 1798, and at the time of its completion was the most imposing structure in the United States. The front portico and dome still

stand as a monument to his skill and good taste. The Maine statehouse was first occupied in 1831. It is supposed to be the Boston statehouse reduced in size. While this was probably the intention, in massiveness and treatment of detail he evidently was influenced by the work which he had been conducting on the Capitol. His work in connection with the Capitol has been amply described in the foregoing pages. Bulfinch was called upon to remodel Faneuil Hall. In that work he appears to have had a veneration for the old work, and made as few alterations in the original design as possible. The first theater erected in Boston, 1794, designed by Bulfinch, was highly commended for its exterior design and interior arrangements. Besides the McLean Asylum, which was a work of considerable magnitude, Bulfinch designed a large number of banks and business buildings in Boston and its vicinity.

Bulfinch shows throughout his career as an architect good judgment and refinement in his work and a capacity to simplify and not overload with poor ornament. He always seems to have had a good eye for the proper proportion of the masses and a delicacy in treating his details. At the time he pursued his studies in England the followers of Wren were fast destroying and belittling the beauty of the style which Wren had introduced. Bulfinch seems to have had the good taste and

judgment to avoid the extravagances which were coming into vogue and adhere to the simpler and better models. He probably followed the Adams brothers and Chambers to a greater extent than other leaders.

Bulfinch served his native city from 1800 to 1816. He was chairman of the selectmen of the town of Boston, discharging these duties at the time in which he was actively engaged in the practice of his profession. He died in Boston on the 15th day of April, 1844.

I am indebted for most of the facts in relation to Bulfinch to the book of his granddaughter and to an article by Mr. Willard.¹¹

¹¹ Brown's sources for his biographical sketch of Bulfinch included Ellen Susan Bulfinch, ed., *The Life and Letters of Charles Bulfinch, Architect* (Boston: Houghton, Mifflin, 1896); Ashton R. Willard, "Charles Bulfinch, the Architect," *New England Magazine* 3 (November 1890): 29; *Appleton's Cyclopedia of American Biography*, vol. 1, 444; *The Architectural Dictionary*; and Howard, "The Architect of the American Capitol," 736-753.

Major modern studies of Bulfinch's career include Harold Kirker, *The Architecture of Charles Bulfinch* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1969) and Harold Kirker and James Kirker, *Bulfinch's Boston* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1964). For Bulfinch's overall contribution to American architecture, see also Pierson, *American Buildings and Their Architects*.