
CHAPTER IV

THE WORK OF BENJAMIN HENRY LATROBE, ARCHITECT

THE PLAT of the city made by Robert King in 1803 [Plate 39] gives an idea of the proposed arrangement of the grounds at this period of the Capitol's history.^{1,2}

The following letters from Thomas Jefferson give the particulars of Benj. H. Latrobe's appointment as "Director of public works" or "Surveyor of public buildings," the position formerly held by James Hoban:

WASHINGTON, D.C., *March 6, 1803.*

SIR: Congress has appropriated a sum of \$50,000, to be applied to the public buildings under my direction. This falls, of course, under the immediate business of the superintendent, Mr. Munroe, whose office is substituted for that of the board of commissioners. The former post of surveyor of the public buildings, which Mr. Hoban held until the dissolution of the board at [\$1,700 a year], will be revived.

If you choose to accept it, you will be appointed to it, and would be expected to come on by the 1st of April. Indeed, if you could make a flying trip here to set contractors at work immediately in raising freestone, it would be extremely important, because it is now late to have to engage laborers, and the quantity of freestone which can be raised,

¹For the series of articles on which this chapter was based, see Glenn Brown, "History of the United States Capitol," *The American Architect and Building News* 52 (July 4, 1896): 3-5 ; 52 (July 25, 1896): 27-30; and (September 5, 1896): 75-78.

²Brown is referring to a set of plat maps compiled by Robert King and his two sons Nicholas and Robert King, Jr., between 1802 and 1804, known as the King plats. For a history of the surveyor's office in this period, see Ralph E. Ehrenberg, "Mapping the Nation's Capital: The Surveyor's Office, 1791-1828," *The Quarterly Journal of the Library of Congress* 36 (Summer 1979): 279-319.

delivered, and cut in the season is the only thing that will limit the extent of our operations this year.

I set out to-morrow for Monticello, and shall be absent three weeks, but shall be glad to receive there your answer to this.

Accept my friendly salutations and regards,

TH. JEFFERSON.

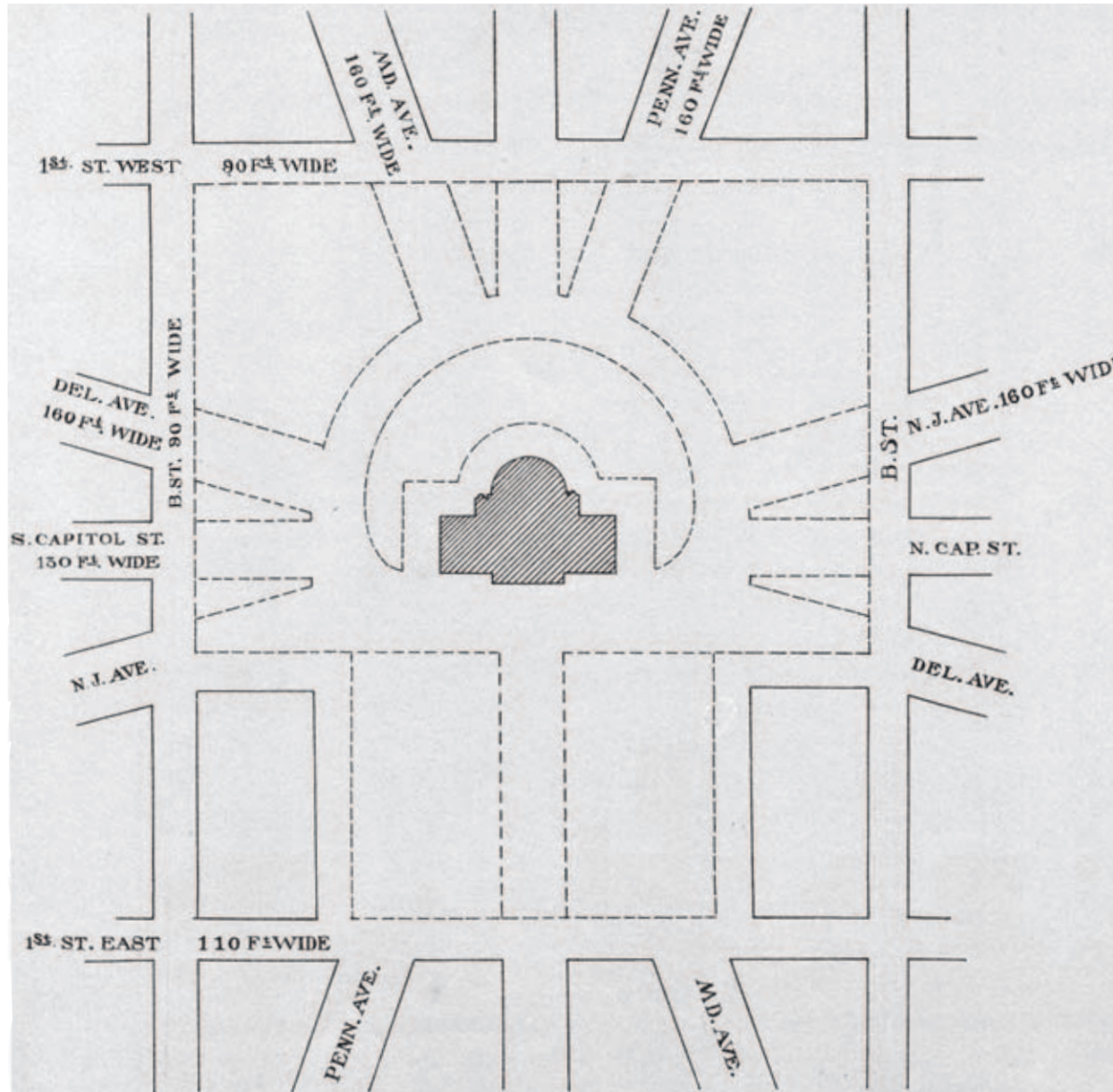
P. S.—On the raising of freestone be pleased to consult Col. D. H. Brent, who can give you better information and advice on the subject than any other person whatever, having been much concerned in the business himself.

MARCH 6, 1803.³

DEAR SIR: The letter in which this is inclosed being a public one, and to be produced whenever necessary as a voucher, I have thought that it would be useful to add a word in one of a private and friendly nature. From the sum of \$50,000 we shall take between \$5,000 and \$10,000 for covering the north wing of the Capitol and the President's House.

The residue of \$40,000 to \$45,000 will be employed in building the south wing, as far as it will go. I think it will raise the external walls as far as the uppermost window sills, being those of the entresols, and I have no doubt Congress at their next session will give another \$50,000, which will complete that wing inside and out in the year 1804. . . . Should you think proper to undertake it, if you come on here on a flying trip, as suggested in my other letter, you can advise with Mr.

³Thomas Jefferson to Benjamin Henry Latrobe, March 6, 1803, in John C. Van Horne and Lee W. Formwalt, eds., *The Correspondence and Miscellaneous Papers of Benjamin Henry Latrobe*, vol. 1 (New Haven, Conn.: Yale University Press, 1984), 260-261.



PLAT OF GROUNDS, 1803.

Site map based on the Robert King plats of Washington, D.C., by Glenn Brown, 1900. *Location unknown.*

Munroe, who will set into motion whatever you may desire, and if you can be here finally the first week in April you will find me here, and everything may be put under full sail for the season.

Accept my best wishes and respects,
TH. JEFFERSON.

P. S.—I think a great deal of sheet iron will be wanting.⁴

Latrobe accepted this appointment and took charge of the work immediately. April 7, 1803, he appointed John Lenthall clerk of works, giving him the following authority:

“I have to inform you that it is clearly understood by the President of the United States and the superintendent of the city that you are to be the sole judge of the merits of the workmen. . . . You are also the sole judge in my absence of the fidelity with which contracts are fulfilled. . . . no money will be paid without your certificate; you will thereby obtain complete control over the conduct of every man employed.”⁵

Although Latrobe was appointed to superintend the completion of the Capitol according to Thornton’s designs, his first thought upon taking the work seems to have been upon changes he could suggest, and after the experience with Hallet and Hadfield this naturally provoked Thornton. Latrobe, after eight or nine months’ study, made his suggestions to Jefferson, who referred him to Thornton. Latrobe’s letter (February 27, 1804) to Jefferson gives the result of the interview:

“DEAR SIR: I judged very ill in going to Dr. Thornton. In a few peremptory words he, in fact, told me that no difficulties existed in his plan but such as were made by those who were too ignorant to remove them, and, though those were not exactly his words, his expressions, his

⁴Jefferson to Latrobe, March 6, 1803, in Van Horne and Formwalt, *Papers of Benjamin Henry Latrobe*, vol. 1, 262.

⁵Latrobe to John Lenthall, March 6, 1803, in Van Horne and Formwalt, *Papers of Benjamin Henry Latrobe*, vol. 1, 284–286.

tones, his manners, and his absolute refusal to discuss the subject spoke his meaning more strongly and offensively than I have expressed.”⁶

President Jefferson replied on the following day:

“DEAR SIR: I am very sorry the explanations attempted between Dr. Thornton and yourself on the manner of finishing the House of Representatives have not succeeded.”⁷

Latrobe carried on his crusade against Thornton’s design and plans vigorously and persistently until he partially accomplished his purpose. To his own mind, as well as to that of others in authority, he justified his changes of the accepted plan. In efforts to accomplish his purpose, Latrobe had personal interviews with the President, and used his early reports to Congress with effect. His reports, many letters to Jefferson, and a pamphlet of 32 pages, entitled *A Private Letter to Individual Members of Congress on the Subject of the Public Buildings of the United States* (November 28, 1806), are on record.⁸ In his criticisms Latrobe was sharp, sarcastic, in many cases unreasonable, and unjust,

⁶Latrobe to Jefferson, February 27, 1804, in Van Horne and Formwalt, *Papers of Benjamin Henry Latrobe*, vol. 1, 437. Brown cites only the first few lines of the letter and omits Latrobe’s account of his frustrating encounter with Thornton and his seeming inability to understand the plan’s “practical difficulties in execution which twenty years’ experience creates in the mind of a professional man.”

⁷Jefferson to Latrobe, February 28, 1804, in Van Horne and Formwalt, *Papers of Benjamin Henry Latrobe*, vol. 1, 439–440. Strangely, Brown quotes only the first line of the reply. Later in the same letter, Jefferson praised the existing plan for the House of Representatives as “more handsome and commodious than anything which can now be proposed on the same area.”

⁸Latrobe’s reports and letters to Jefferson between 1804 and 1806 were compiled in Saul K. Padover, *Thomas Jefferson and the National Capital* (Washington: Government Printing Office, 1946), 335–380. See also Benjamin Henry Latrobe, *A Private Letter to the Individual Members of Congress on the Subject of the Public Buildings of the United States at Washington* (Washington: S. H. Smith, Printer, 1806).

judging from the records, his letters, drawings, and pamphlets. It is entirely natural Dr. Thornton should have been dissatisfied, and from the nature and ability of the man that he should return criticism of equal sharpness. Latrobe's letter to the President and reports state that the open space inclosed by the elliptical hall becomes a dark cellar when the Legislative Hall is raised to the story above. "Therefore the doors leading into it are useless if not absurd." "No fireplaces can be carried up except on outer walls and this would be difficult on account of hardness of brickwork. No staircases could be built behind the Speaker's chair in elliptical inclosure."⁹

Latrobe, although objecting to the plan made by Thornton for the House of Representatives and "which is said to be the plan approved by General Washington," writes, February 28, 1804, that he is determined to carry it out, elliptical room, colonnade, and all, provided he can raise the floor to the level of the principal floor.¹⁰ Following this determination Latrobe submitted to the President, March 29, 1804, plans suggesting slight modifications of the original scheme, in which he proposed to rectify these errors, according to his ideas, by changing the elliptical form of the Chamber, and substituting "two semicircles abutting on a parallelogram." He further took the liberty to alter the whole of Thornton's plan where "a spacious stairway ran only to a gallery and a room 50 feet square with one window."¹¹ If Latrobe could have seen

the present requirements of a gallery he would have seen that a spacious stairway was necessary. Latrobe seriously objected both in his letters and printed documents to the design with which he was compelled to conform, because of the portions of the building already erected.

The drawings submitted show a change in the plan of the form from an ellipse to two semicircles abutting on parallel sides, and change of floor level from the basement to the principal floor [Plates 40 to 42]. The illustrations show a plan and section through the north and south, and east and west. Latrobe in the drawings submits an alternate scheme for the order of the colonnades. Jefferson selected the most ornate one, which was taken from the Temple of the Winds at Athens. At Jefferson's request Thornton submitted a sketch showing how he would arrange office rooms in the basement if it was determined to raise the floor in the House and Senate [Plate 43]. The following indorsement is written on this drawing by Latrobe:

"Mr. Jefferson in putting this into my hands stated that he had communicated with Dr. Thornton on the plan submitted by me for putting a story of offices under the Hall of Representatives and that Dr. Thornton had, in consequence, given him this plan as showing how the projection might be effected, but at that time my plan was already in progress [Plate 43].

"B. H. LATROBE.

"FEBRUARY 1, 1805."¹²

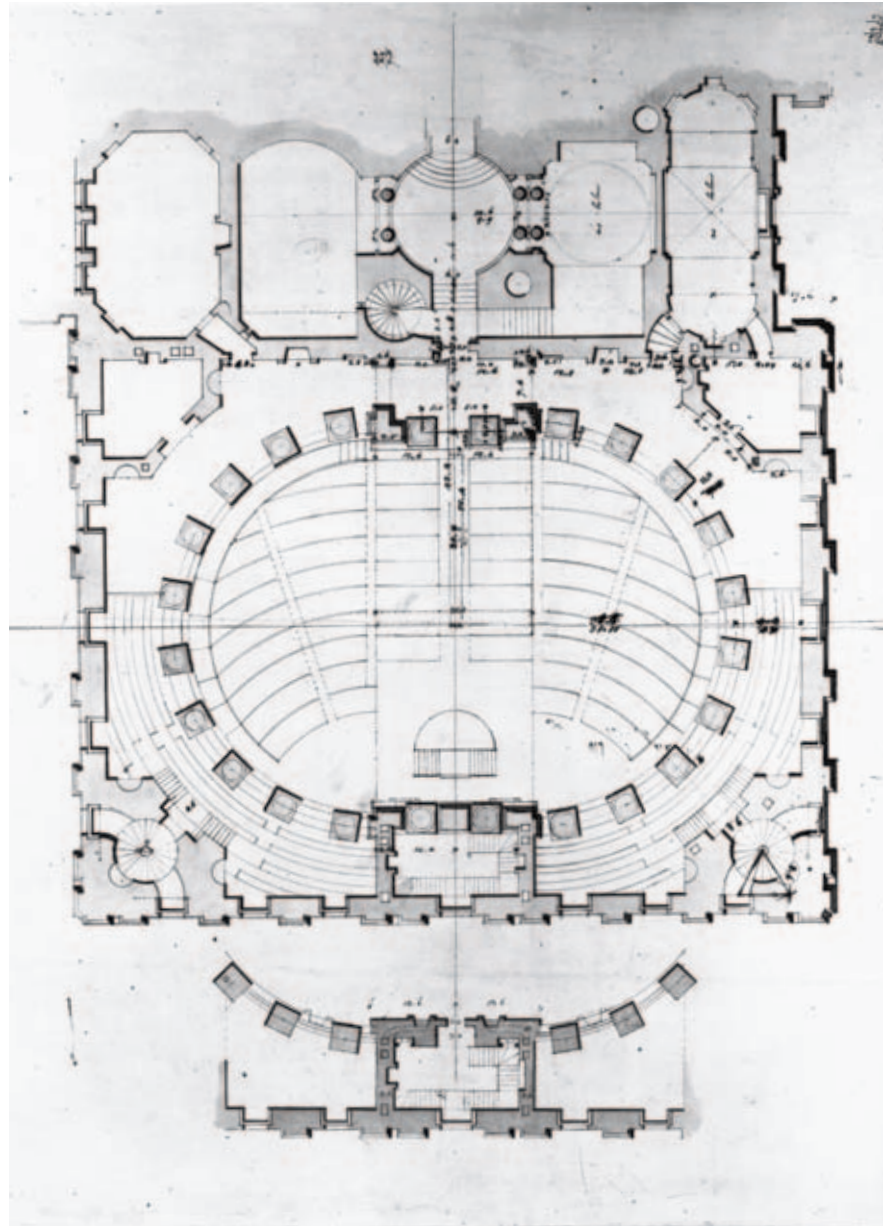
To defend himself and his design before Congress and the people, Thornton addressed a letter to Congress in answer to Latrobe's report. The document is a very clear statement of the case, and all the facts as stated are confirmed by the records or contemporary documents. For

⁹ Benjamin Henry Latrobe to Thomas Jefferson, March 29, 1804, in Edward C. Carter II, editor in chief and Thomas E. Jeffrey, microfiche editor, *The Papers of Benjamin Henry Latrobe* (microtext edition) (Clifton, N.J.: James T. White and Co., 1976). Brown fails to mention that these critical remarks were addressed toward a plan by Thornton for an office story for the south wing of the Capitol. See Plate 43.

¹⁰ Latrobe to Jefferson, February 28, 1804, in Van Horne and Formwalt, *Papers of Benjamin Henry Latrobe*, vol. 1, 441-443.

¹¹ Latrobe to Jefferson, March 29, 1804, in Van Horne and Formwalt, *Papers of Benjamin Henry Latrobe*, vol. 1, 466-472.

¹² Thornton's original undated sketch plan bearing Latrobe's February 1, 1805, inscription is located in the Prints and Photographs Division, LC. Comparing Thornton's sketch with Benjamin Henry Latrobe's ground floor plans illustrates Latrobe's superior professional skill.



PLAN, LATROBE'S MODIFICATION OF THORNTON'S PLAN. HOUSE OF REPRESENTATIVES.

Plan of the principal floor of the south wing, as built under Benjamin Henry Latrobe's supervision before 1811. *Prints and Photographs Division, LC.*



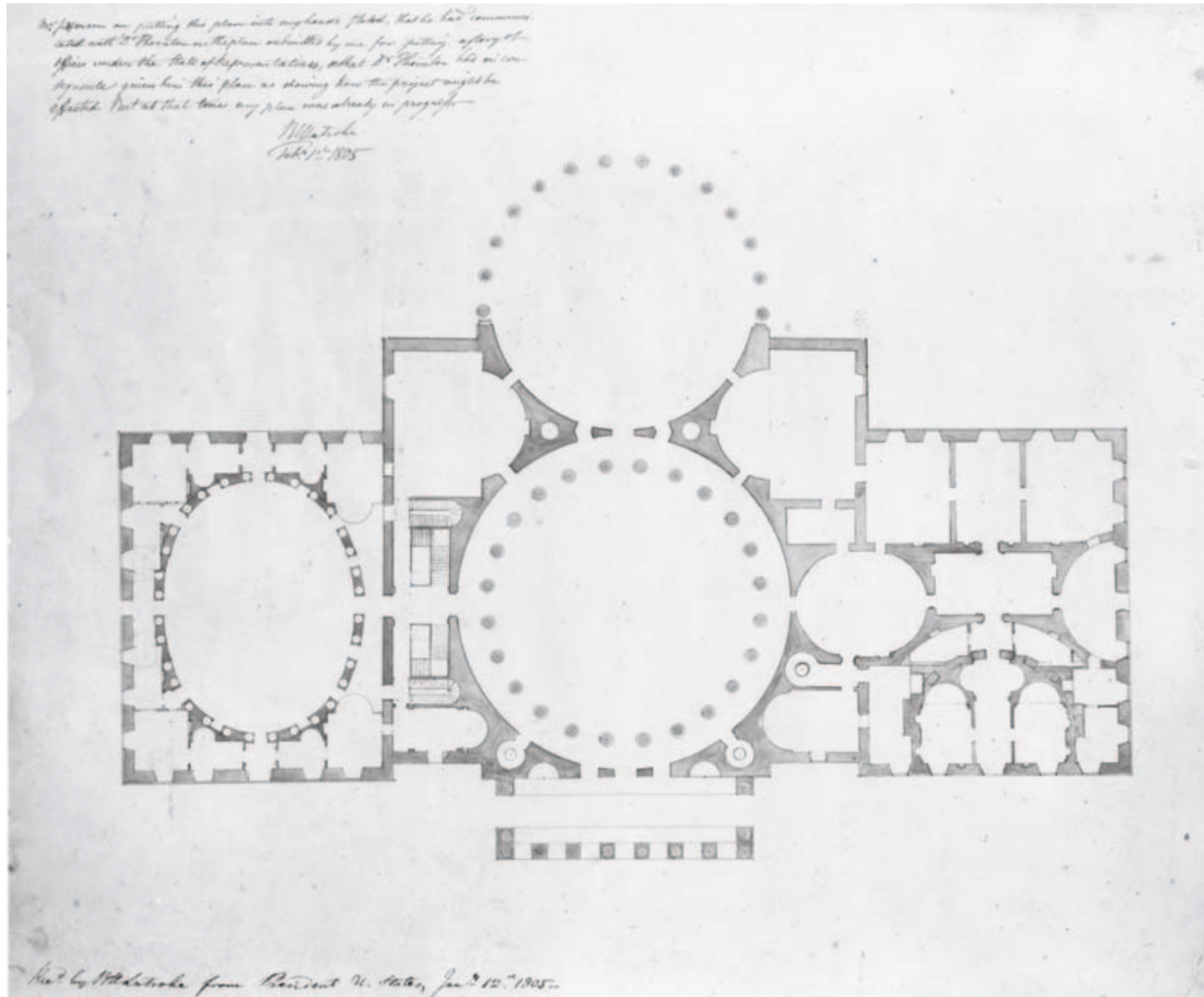
CROSS SECTION, LATROBE'S MODIFICATION OF THORNTON'S PLAN, HOUSE OF REPRESENTATIVES.

Section of the south wing (looking west), ca. 1804. *Prints and Photographs Division, LC.*



LONGITUDINAL SECTION, LATROBE'S MODIFICATION OF THORNTON'S PLAN FOR THE HOUSE OF REPRESENTATIVES.

Section of the south wing (looking south) through ground and principal floors, ca. 1804. *Prints and Photographs Division, LC.*



THORNTON'S SKETCH FOR BASEMENT ROOMS.

Plan of first floor of the Capitol, date unknown. *Prints and Photographs Division, LC.*

this reason I quote liberally from this letter of January 1, 1805. He says: “Previous to Mr. Latrobe’s appointment, when he came to report on dry docks suggested by the President, he often complimented me on the plan of the Capitol, a ground plan and elevation of which I had shown him, and he declared in the presence of the superintendent [probably James Hoban at that time] that he never saw any other plan of a building besides his own that he would deign to execute. I must own I can not easily conceive why previous to this appointment I should hear nothing but approbation of my plan and after his appointment nothing but condemnation. In the commencement of his report he mentions the approval of my plan by General Washington. . . . Mr. Hallet was appointed to execute it, but not until after I had refused to superintend its execution. . . . Mr. Hallet was desirous of altering not merely what might be improved, but even what was most approved.”¹³ At this point he describes Hallet’s attempted changes, an account of which I have given in previous pages. After describing the removal of the foundations laid by Hallet for his square central space instead of a dome, Thornton continues:

“A portion of what I intended to remove was directed by the board of commissioners to remain, in order to erect thereon a temporary building of brick for the accommodation of Congress until more committee rooms could be prepared by the further progress of the building. On the opposite side, the walls built by Mr. Hallet between the Dome and the Representatives’ Chamber still remain, which may in some way account for the difference mentioned by Mr. Latrobe between the plan as laid down and the drawing. Mr. Hallet was not in the public service when I was appointed commissioner, September 12, 1794.” Then he describes Hadfield’s connection with the Capitol, an account of which

I have already given. After the statement of facts in reference to his design, which I have found fully proved by the public records, he continues: “Mr. Latrobe must have been exceedingly misinformed when he speaks of the various styles of each architect showing themselves in the work, one having been out of public employ before the present elevation was drawn and before a single freestone was laid, and the other having taken his discharge because he was not allowed to make any material alterations. They are both [Hallet and Hadfield], however, men of genius, which I acknowledge with pleasure.

“Mr. Latrobe’s observation respecting the want of agreement in the plan and foundation is already answered; but if I could be surprised at any observation made by Mr. Latrobe after reading his report it would be at his stating the author furnished him only a ground plan. It may be true I did not give him drawings, but I informed him what was intended in completing the south wing, and to show that he understood we need only his description—tenth page of the committee’s report.” It must be remembered that it was only the south wing that was under discussion, and the exterior of the south wing was to be an exact duplicate of the north wing, which was completed when Latrobe took charge, and, further, that the drawings had never been in Thornton’s possession since the commencement of the work. “He [Latrobe] speaks of the impracticability of the plan of the south wing. It has been deemed practicable by very skillful and practical architects, and I never heard it disputed by other than himself. He told me that he could not execute it as it was intended. To support a coved ceiling formed in the manner of the Hal au Blé at Paris of the extent contemplated on columns of wood [it will be remembered that Thornton’s original idea was to make the interior work of marble] can not in the conception of an architect be difficult; and I believe it will be generally admitted that the grandeur of the room contemplated would far exceed the appearance of the one intended by him and at much less expense. The stability of the work

¹³ William Thornton, *To the Members of the House of Representatives, January 1, 1805*, vols. 3–4, William Thornton Papers, Manuscript Division, LC.

could not be an objection, when it is remembered how many hundred years Westminster Hall has stood.

“It is astonishing what evidence is considered sufficient to establish facts to a mind that I am sorry to say appears preoccupied by a desire to condemn [Dr. Thornton here quotes from Latrobe]: ‘The most indisputable evidence was brought before me to prove [a negation] that no sections or detail drawings of the building had ever existed excepting those that were made from time to time by Messrs. Hallet and Hadfield for their own use in the direction of the work.’” [Page 10 of Report.] “It will be remembered that one of these gentlemen never superintended the laying of a single stone of the elevation. The other did not make a single section that I ever heard of, but required sections of me, which I drew, and of which Mr. Munroe told me he had informed Mr. Latrobe.

“The whole area of the south wing of the Capitol might be conceived by some as too extensive for a Chamber of Representatives, but if we consider the rapid increase of the American people, and that 500 Representatives may be required, neither the space allotted for the members nor the gallery for the audience will be considered too large. To lessen either would therefore, in my judgment, be a very important objection.

“Mr. Latrobe mentions the want of committee and other rooms. The President [Mr. Jefferson] of the United States had, some months before Mr. Latrobe’s appointment, spoken to me on the subject, and asked if they could be formed in the basement story with convenience, under the Representatives’ Chamber. Approving much the idea on many accounts, independent of its restoring the building to a greater conformity with my original designs for the south wing raised, with committee rooms under the galleries, the President’s idea was carried further, for I drew a plan of the Senate Room [present Supreme Court] raised within a few feet of the base of the columns and with two good rooms beneath, one on each side, besides two smaller for paper, etc., and a passage from a door in the external center to the lobby [Plate 43].

This would much improve the proportion of the Senate Room, the arcade of which is too high for the columns. A coved ceiling might be thrown from the entablature so as to give any desired elevation. These alterations were laid before the President [Jefferson] many months before Mr. Latrobe’s report was written, and if Mr. Latrobe had extended his alterations only to the committee and other rooms, however they might have differed from mine in form, size, or appropriateness, I should not have considered them of sufficient importance to call forth my objections; but under a sincere conviction that the Representatives’ Chamber will be irreparably [marred] by the alterations now in execution I am compelled by a sense of duty, but with great reluctance on other accounts, to express my disapprobation of the measure.

“I have seen Mr. Latrobe’s report of December last and find much stress is laid on the imperfections of the foundation of the south wing, which required to be taken down. Six feet [in height] of the foundation had been built by a contractor, during whose absence the work was ill conducted by those in whom he had confided. The work was directed to be examined and was condemned by the commissioners. The correspondent part of the north wing was taken down and good bond stones intermingled throughout the new work, by which it was rendered completely solid; and as that and the stonework of the elevation were well executed, if any defect can be hereafter discovered it must depend upon injuries received by piercing so many large holes through it, or on defects in the lower part of the foundation which was laid before I was in office. It was a query at the time of its execution whether it would not be better to lay the foundation with inverted arches, but it was thought more expensive and not better than by good bond stones in the more usual manner, and I imagine that those who pierced the foundations of the north wing, thereby injuring it by cutting loose many of the bonds, found it to be exceptional work; but I think it might have been perfectly aired by tubes at a trifling expense without risking any injury

whatever. The roof has been justly condemned. It is next to impossible to put any elevated covering that shall resist the ingress of water when the gutters are filled with snow or deluged with rain. I object to the roof as now executed not solely on that account. By rising so high, the balustrade is darkened until the beholder advances so near the building as to lose the general view; it is thus rendered heavy in appearance. I proposed a flat roof made with a composition that has since been found to answer perfectly by Mr. Foxall, and by varying the ingredients a little he has formed a variety of excellent cements. It is made in imitation of a terraced roof, though greatly superior.”

This was the last public effort of Thornton in defense of his plan. The alterations advised by Latrobe were executed, and I think few will contend that they were improvements. [See Plates 40 to 46.]¹⁴

Although Dr. Thornton made no further efforts to preserve the integrity of his plan, Latrobe still found he did not have an easy time contending with Jefferson, Congress, and the newspapers. Jefferson had individual ideas on architecture, Congress considered the cost, and were slow in making and gave but little in their appropriations; at the same time they were disposed to take exception to the time of erection and cost of construction. The newspapers complained of the slow progress, character of the work, and of Latrobe’s frequent absence from the city in connection with his private business. Thornton likewise prodded him on his deficiencies, in private and published letters. As a general answer to these parties, Latrobe on November 28, 1806, issued a pamphlet entitled “A Private Letter to the Individual Members of

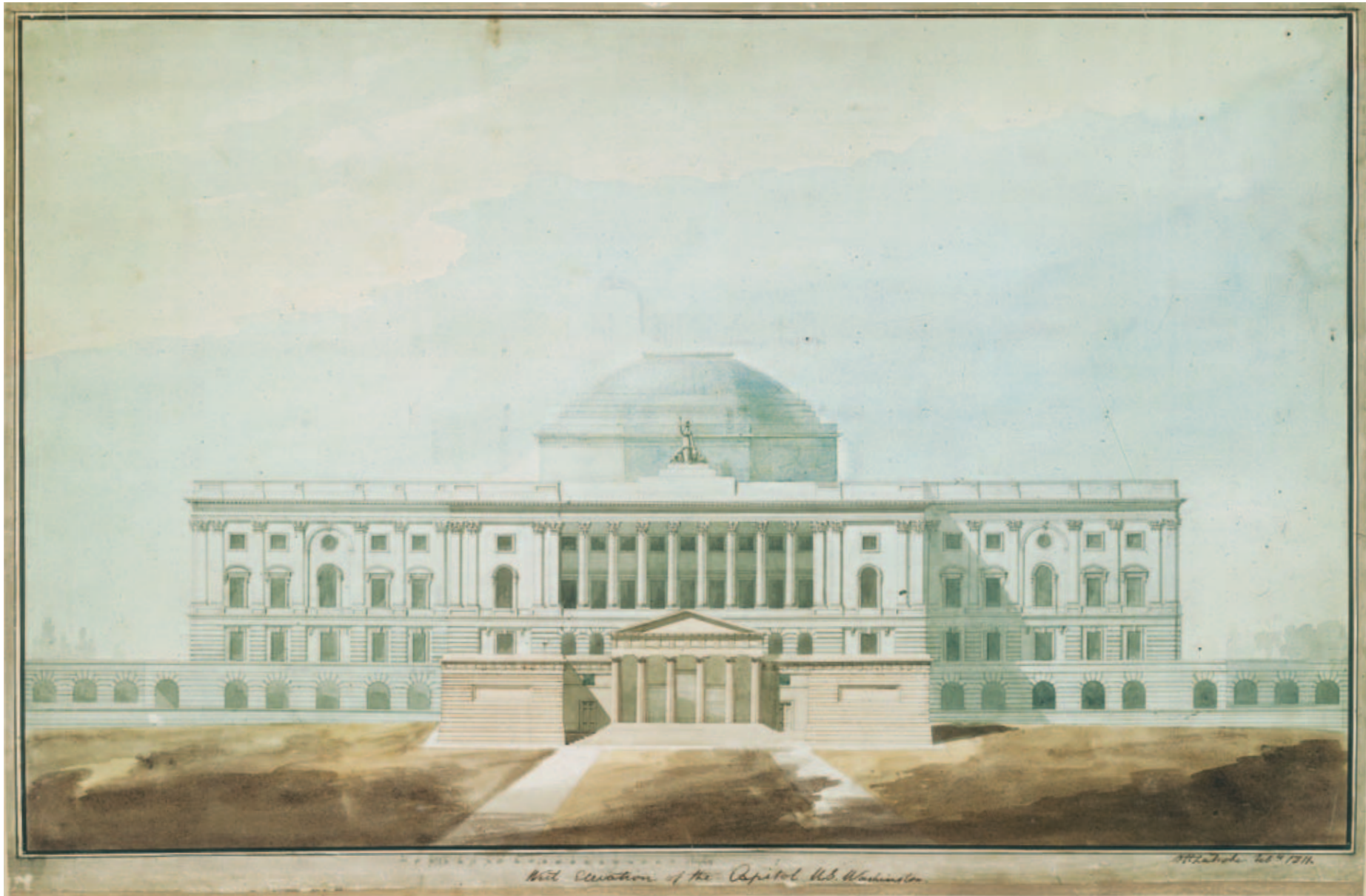
¹⁴ Modern works since the 1950s praise Latrobe’s alterations and acknowledge his superior skill. See, for example, Talbot F. Hamlin, *Benjamin Henry Latrobe* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1955); Paul F. Norton, *Latrobe, Jefferson, and the National Capitol* (New York: Garland Publishers, 1977); for a survey of American architectural history that reflects this view, see William H. Pierson, Jr., *American Buildings and Their Architects: The Colonial and Neo-Classical Styles* (Garden City, N.Y.: Anchor Books, 1976), 398–402.

Congress on the Subject of the Public Buildings of the United States.”¹⁵ In this letter he gives as his excuse for the slow progress of the work the uncertainty of Government appropriations and the difficulties of quarrying stone. He makes a plea for changing the method of making appropriations. From this he passes into criticisms of Thornton’s design, and states that the method of choosing a design by competition was a mistake and certain of defeating its own end. He refers to the design of the north wing which he was compelled to follow in the south wing [the present Supreme Court and Statuary Hall]. “I frankly confess that, excepting a few of the details, all my ideas of good taste and even good sense in architecture were shocked by the style of the building. I am well aware that in what I shall say in this I am in the minority. All books for the last three or four hundred years are against me. But as the arts continue to improve, simplicity gains more admirers daily. . . .

“But with the actual shape and appearance of the building little could be done but adhere to the style of the exterior and to add all the conveniences of the offices which were required for the transaction of the business of the House.” At this point Latrobe describes quite minutely the changes which he claimed to have made in the original plan. As these points are treated fully in other portions of this treatise, I will not quote them here.

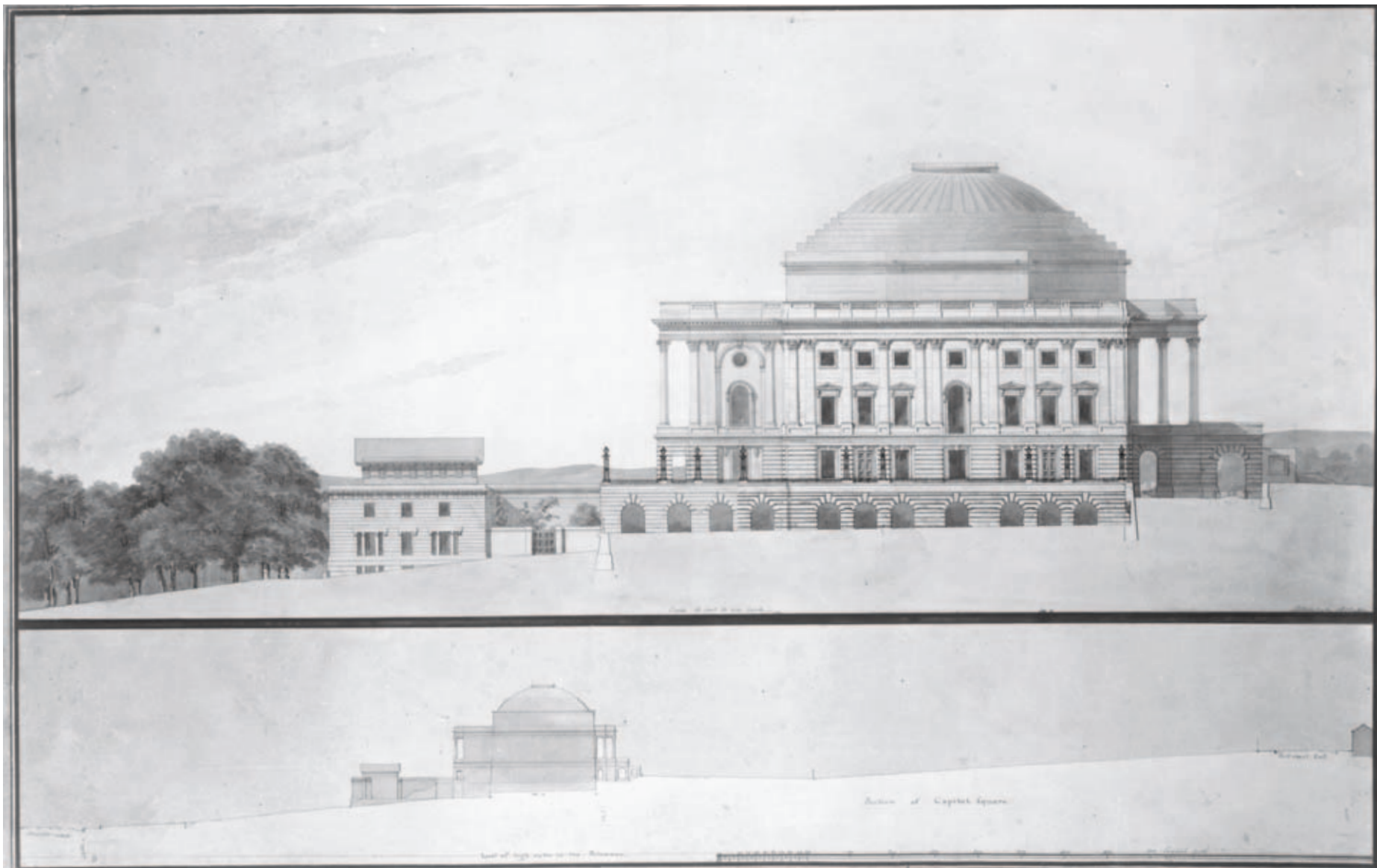
He compliments Jefferson in the following glowing terms: “The warm interest which the President has taken in everything that relates to the design, arrangement, and management of the work, and to that impulse which a mind by whom no field of art or science has been unexplored gives to all the agents he employs, more is due than delicacy permits me to express. On the intelligent activity and integrity of the clerk of works, Mr. Lenthall, it is impossible to bestow too much

¹⁵ Benjamin Henry Latrobe, *A Private Letter to the Individual Members of Congress on the Subject of the Public Buildings of the United States at Washington* (Washington: S. H. Smith, Printer, 1806).



LATROBE'S DESIGN FOR DOME AND CENTER BUILDING, WEST VIEW.

West elevation of a partially executed design for the Capitol, 1811. *Prints and Photographs Division, LC.*



SOUTH VIEW SHOWING LATROBE'S DOME, & EAST & WEST PROJECTIONS.
South elevation of a partially executed design for the Capitol, 1810-11. *Prints and Photographs Division, LC.*

commendation.” Thornton published a sharp and sarcastic answer to this pamphlet, which is interesting in its local hits and comments, but as it simply covers facts which have been mentioned before I will not quote from it. From this period until the work ceased on the Capitol, in 1811, Latrobe appears to have been untrammelled except by the restrictions of President Jefferson. Munroe, who assumed a part of the duties belonging to the board of commissioners, either did not keep a record of the work or such record has been lost; the limited number of letters in reference to the subject in possession of the Government are in the State Department among the manuscript letters to and from Jefferson. The data from which information must be drawn are letters of Latrobe in the possession of the family; a volume from Latrobe to John Lenthall, clerk of works, in possession of Mr. W. S. Abert, a grandson of Lenthall; Latrobe’s report to Congress, and Jefferson’s published correspondence.¹⁶ Unfortunately this matter covers only one side of the issue. In reference to all points before this date we have the regularly recorded transactions of the commissioners and letters covering both sides of every question. To arrive at a clear understanding of B. H. Latrobe’s work on the Capitol it is necessary to compare his drawings with Thornton’s and his letters and reports with documents of earlier date, showing what had been contemplated before he took charge.

¹⁶William S. Abert (1858–1921), the grandson of John Lenthall, was a Washington lawyer who had commissioned Brown to design his house (1892) and a commercial building (1896). Latrobe’s sons, John H. B. Latrobe (1803–91) and Benjamin Henry Latrobe, Jr. (1806–78), inherited and preserved the bulk of their father’s papers, which were acquired in the 1960s by the Maryland Historical Society from Latrobe descendant Mrs. Ferdinand Latrobe. Brown did not use this major collection for the preparation of the *History*. For Jefferson’s correspondence Brown consulted either Paul Leicester Ford, *The Writings of Thomas Jefferson*, 10 vols. (New York: G. P. Putnam’s Sons, 1892–1899), or Henry Augustus Washington, *The Writings of Thomas Jefferson: Being His Autobiography, Correspondence, Reports, Messages, Addresses, and Other Writings, Official and Private*, 9 vols. (Philadelphia: J. B. Lippincott and Company, 1869–71).

I have already mentioned the changes which Latrobe proposed in connection with the south wing (present Statuary Hall) [Plates 40 to 42]. These changes were carried out, and Latrobe took great credit for the alteration of a very gracefully formed elliptical room into a badly formed one, with two short sides and semicircular ends, decreasing the size and changing the form of the staircase to the galleries, and placing committee rooms under galleries. Thornton had previously made a plan for this purpose [see Plate 43]. It will be seen at a glance, by comparing the plan of Thornton with the one of Latrobe, that the changes were simply modifications in form, size, and detail. Thornton’s original scheme still remained, so changed as to destroy much of its beauty and utility, but the broad principles of his plan for this portion of the building were still intact.

The Hall of Representatives was considered upon its completion a very magnificent room. The British officer who burned it said it was a “pity to burn anything so beautiful,” and Mr. Jefferson, in a letter from Monticello, April 14, 1811, says: “I declare, on many and all occasions, that I considered you [B. H. Latrobe] the only person in the United States who could have executed the Representative Chamber or who could execute the middle building on any of the plans proposed;”¹⁷ and July, 1812: “The Representative Chamber will remain a durable monument to your talents as an architect.”¹⁸ It is easy for an architect to take the suggestion of Thornton’s plan and imagine or realize how much more effective a hall reared on its lines would have been than the one built on the lines shown by Latrobe’s plan. Jefferson’s instructions or interference in the plan and design of the Capitol appears to have been,

¹⁷Jefferson quoted in “The Capitol and Washington at the Beginning of the Present Century,” in *An Address Delivered by John H. B. Latrobe Before the American Institute of Architects* (Baltimore: William K. Boyle, 1881).

¹⁸Jefferson to Latrobe, July [12?], 1812, in Van Horne, *Papers of Benjamin Henry Latrobe*, vol. 3, 329, n. 6.

judging from his letters, usually suggestive and not mandatory. These recommendations usually appear to have been in reference to detail; his idea, as we learn from hints all the way through the correspondence, was to follow Thornton's plan, with which he was familiar from its first appearance in the competition. Latrobe says, in the pamphlet above referred to (1806): "That he [Jefferson] directed I should deviate as little as possible from the plan approved by General Washington."¹⁹

Jefferson told Dr. Thornton no alterations should be permitted, when Latrobe was appointed, without allowing Thornton an opportunity of giving his judgment upon the changes. In Latrobe's letters to Lenthall he describes his troubles in obtaining the President's consent to change the form of the House of Representatives, and freely criticises the President and Congress. The majority of the suggestions made by Jefferson were approved by Latrobe. Sometimes Mr. Jefferson insisted on points against which Latrobe protested. From the sources mentioned above the progress and character of the work during this portion of Latrobe's incumbency can be readily described. The roof covering was one of the first parts of the building to which Jefferson called his attention, being anxious to have Latrobe cover both the Capitol and President's House with sheet iron, as the President was having a roof of this character placed on Monticello; and he expresses his surprise, September 5, 1803, that Latrobe had not already commenced his work. July 31, 1804, the exterior of the south wing was completed to the height of the principal floor and the foundations were ready for the interior work. After the adjournment of Congress in 1804 the temporary elliptical room was removed, and the House of Representatives again held its sessions in the room first occupied by them. This was done because Latrobe thought that the interior and exterior walls

should go up simultaneously. January 16, 1805, Jefferson authorized Latrobe to order from Bordeaux, France, hexagon paving tiles for the floors of the Senate, House of Representatives, clerks' and committee rooms. August 31, 1805, the exterior walls were finished to the height of the cornice and the wall on which the colonnade encircling the House of Representatives was to rest was completed. At this period Jefferson determined that the windows in the roof of the hall should form panels in the ceiling coinciding with the curve of the ceiling, while Latrobe wished to put in segment windows. During the year 1806 the columns in the house were set and a large part of the cornice was in place. The eagle was on the frieze. Latrobe, August 27, 1806, says: "Not in ancient or modern sculpture is there an eagle head which is in dignity, spirit, and drawing superior to Franzoni's."²⁰ The office story was ready for the plastering and the walls were ready for the roof September 27, and later the roof was sheathed in. Latrobe framed the roof for ceiling lights, but at the same time put in framing for a lantern "in case the other lights failed." During the year 1807 the roof (it was found necessary to purchase the glass for the ceiling in England), plastering, and painting were completed. August 13, 1807, Latrobe was engaged in making drawings for the alterations in the north wing, which had been approved by Jefferson and by Congress in the session of 1806-1807. The model of a Statue of Liberty by Franzoni was put in place in August and the capitals around the House were being carved.²¹

Latrobe removed the portions of the roof on the north wing over the lobby and some of the valleys where the leakage had caused the timbers to rot, and replaced them with sound timbers. He first suggested grouping the chimneys and carrying them up through a cupola.

²⁰ Latrobe to Jefferson, August 27, 1806, in Van Horne, *Papers of Benjamin Henry Latrobe*, vol. 2, 269-270.

²¹ Latrobe to Jefferson, September 11 and November 18, 1808, in Padover, *Thomas Jefferson and the National Capital*, 434; 445-452.

¹⁹ Latrobe, *A Private Letter to the Individual Members of Congress on the Subject of the Public Buildings of the United States at Washington*.

Jefferson did not approve this scheme, but after the destruction of the interior with fire by the British a similar scheme was executed. He states that the House ceiling will be finished in September, and that much of the furniture is on hand for fitting up the room.²²

In March, 1808, the woodwork of the south wing was complete, ready for the painting. The twenty-four Corinthian columns in the House of Representatives progressed slowly, as only two were finished, eight partly finished, and fourteen only roughed out. The trouble with stoves or furnaces in the basement and the echo are discussed by Latrobe at great length in this report. In the north wing the wooden skylight and cove over the main staircase hall was taken down and replaced by a brick cupola, 35 by 45 feet, crowned by a lantern.²³ In 1809 other portions of the wooden construction in the north wing were replaced by brick. The House first met in their new Chamber October 26, 1807. A letter from Mr. Latrobe to the Secretary of the Navy, in 1811, published in the appendix to Dunlap's *History of the Rise and Progress of the Arts of Design in the United States*, refers to Jefferson's positive orders, "that I should introduce Corinthian columns into the House of Representatives, and put one hundred lights of plate glass into the ceiling, contrary to my declared judgment, urgent entreaties, and representations. In other respects, however, the honor which the friendship of the great man has done me obliterates all feeling of dissatisfaction on account of those errors of a vitiated taste and an imperfect attention to the practical effect of his architectural projects."²⁴ Latrobe

²² Latrobe to Jefferson, September 23, 1808, in Padover, *Thomas Jefferson and the National Capital*, 436–438.

²³ "Report of the Surveyor of the Public Buildings of the United States at Washington, March 23, 1808," in *Documentary History*, 131. See also Padover, *Thomas Jefferson and the National Capitol*, 399–413.

²⁴ Brown may be mistaken about the date of the letter. According to Dunlap, the letter was "written by Mr. Latrobe to Wm. Jones, Esq., then Secretary of the Navy." William Jones

wanted to make the capitals of the columns on the model of the Clepsydra at Athens, or the Roman Doric as exhibited in the Theater of Marcellus, at Rome [see Plates 41 and 42]. In his letter, which accompanied the drawings from which the latter plates are made, he suggests that the bells of the capitals be cast in iron in one piece, with the upper row of plain leaves, while the others may be cast separately and riveted on. Jefferson first recommended burnt-brick columns with hewn-stone capitals and bases, but insisted on the capitals being modeled from the Choragic Monument of Lysicrates. The columns were made of free-stone on this latter model. In reference to the skylight, Mr. Jefferson insisted "that the alternate panels in the alternate rows of panels into which the ceiling was divided should be of plate glass." Latrobe objected, because of cross lights, leakage, and condensation, and he was having the work done without the glass when Lenthall received the following letter from Jefferson:

WASHINGTON, D. C., *October 21, 1806.*

DEAR SIR: The skylights in the dome of the House of Representatives' Chamber were a part of the plan as settled and communicated to Mr. Latrobe; that the preparation for them has not been made and the building now to be stopped for them has been wrong; to correct that wrong now they must be immediately prepared, and that the building may be delayed as short a time as possible as many hands as possible should be employed in preparing them.

Accept my salutations and best wishes,

TH. JEFFERSON.

Mr. LENTHALL.²⁵

of Pennsylvania was Secretary of the Navy from January 1813 to December 1814. See William Dunlap, *History of the Rise and Progress of the Arts of Design in the United States* (New York: George P. Scott and Co., Printers, 1834), vol. 2, 473–474.

²⁵ Jefferson to Lenthall, October 21, 1808, in Padover, *Thomas Jefferson and the National Capital*, 371–372.

The ceiling when finished was decorated by George Bridgport, a prominent decorative painter of the day. It was considered successful as a decorative element, but was open to the practical objections Latrobe had urged against it. Latrobe's letters to Lenthall throw light on the everyday troubles in the progress of the building during this period. August 12, 1805, in answer to a criticism calling attention to a lack of drawings for the cornices and entablatures, Latrobe quotes from former letters in which he has told Lenthall to follow Sir William Chambers: "Now, you have William Chambers' book and I have not. I choose rather to refer you to it than involve you in the possibilities of a mistake of mine which might have occurred by rendering the feet and inches of Stuart or Desgodetz into parts of a module; and ten minutes would suffice you, who have these things at your fingers ends, to have become master of the whole subject."²⁶

Lenthall constantly urged the necessity for Latrobe's permanent residence in Washington, and Latrobe as constantly deferred the matter and simply made visits at long intervals. Latrobe lived in Newcastle, Wilmington, Philadelphia, and other towns, wherever he found it most convenient for his private work on the Delaware and Chesapeake Canal. The greater part of his supervision of the Capitol was performed through correspondence with Lenthall. March 3, 1806, Latrobe mentions the arrival from Italy of Giuseppe Franzoni and Giovanni Andrei, with the following comments: "Franzoni is a most excellent sculptor, and capable of cutting our figure of Liberty, and Andrei excels more in decoration. I wish they would seek clay for modeling and then model one of our capitals."²⁷ Latrobe found considerable difficulty in keeping

the arched ceilings from falling. In answer to one of Lenthall's letters, December 31, 1806, he says: "I am sorry the arches have fallen, but I have had these accidents before on a larger scale, and must, therefore, grin and bear it."²⁸ Thornton twitted Latrobe on his vaults falling in Richmond, the Treasury, and the Capitol because of insufficient abutment or no tie-rods.

July 16, 1808, one of the larger arches in the staircase hall showed evidence of giving way, and quite a number of letters passed between Latrobe and Lenthall in reference to the subject. In September, 1808, Lenthall was killed by the falling of this arch.²⁹ The acoustic qualities of the new Hall of Representatives were very defective. A contemporary says that Randolph, of Roanoke, declared the Chamber was "handsome and fit for anything but the use intended." Thornton's advice was asked as to the best method of correcting the echo, and he recommended hanging curtains behind the columns. He at the same time called attention to the fact that if his plan had been strictly adhered to this echo would not have occurred. Latrobe informed Jefferson, January 28, 1808, that by direction of the committee, he had purchased curtains to be hung just back of the columns so as to enhance the beauty of the colonnade, and to experiment with their effect upon the acoustics of the Hall. J. H. B. Latrobe, the son of the architect, says that he can recall, as a recollection of his boyhood, the old Hall of Representatives: "I can see the heavy crimson drapery that hung in massive folds between the tall fluted Corinthian columns to within a short distance of their base; and I remember, or think I remember, the low gilded railing that ran

²⁶ Latrobe to Lenthall, August 9/12, 1805, in Carter, *Papers of Benjamin Henry Latrobe* (microtext edition).

²⁷ Latrobe to Lenthall, March 3, 1806, in Carter, *Papers of Benjamin Henry Latrobe* (microtext edition).

²⁸ Latrobe to Lenthall, December 31, 1806, in Van Horne, *Papers of Benjamin Henry Latrobe*, vol. 2, 346.

²⁹ Lenthall prematurely removed the centering of the Supreme Court vault. For an account of the accident and a discussion of the relationship between Lenthall and Latrobe, see Hamlin, *Benjamin H. Latrobe*, 260–61; 275–77.

from base to base, and over which the spectators in the gallery looked down upon the members on the floor. I seem to see even now the Speaker's chair, with its rich surroundings, and the great stone eagle with outspread wings projecting from the frieze, as though it were hovering over and protecting those below."³⁰

Latrobe made an examination into the condition of the timbers and framework of the north wing of the Capitol in the latter part of 1805. He found the joists and beams much affected by dry rot and the plastering badly cracked. The floors of the room occupied by the House were sagging in the committee room No. 4 [Plate 35], and Latrobe reported, August 31, 1805, that the girder upon which the joists rested had decayed by dry rot, and he suggested placing a partition under this girder, thus dividing the room into two committee rooms.³¹ This alteration was made. At a later date he says: "The tenons of the oak joists were entirely gone, and the only species of timber that has withstood decay was the pine and poplar of which the beams were made; all the white oak was seized with dry rot; almost all the plates and bond timbers which were partially buried in the walls were, on the interior, reduced to powder. Upon the damaged part of such timber the brick piers of the Senate Chamber stood. [Presumably this has reference to bond timbers let into the wall according to English methods. Both Hoban and Hadfield as superintendents would naturally have followed English precedents.] Independently of the general rottenness of the timber, the frequent alterations which the design had undergone in its original progress had so weakened the work and one of the heaviest

³⁰John H. B. Latrobe, "The Capitol at Washington at the Beginning of the Present Century," in *An Address by John H. B. Latrobe Before the American Institute of Architects* (Baltimore: William K. Boyle, 1881).

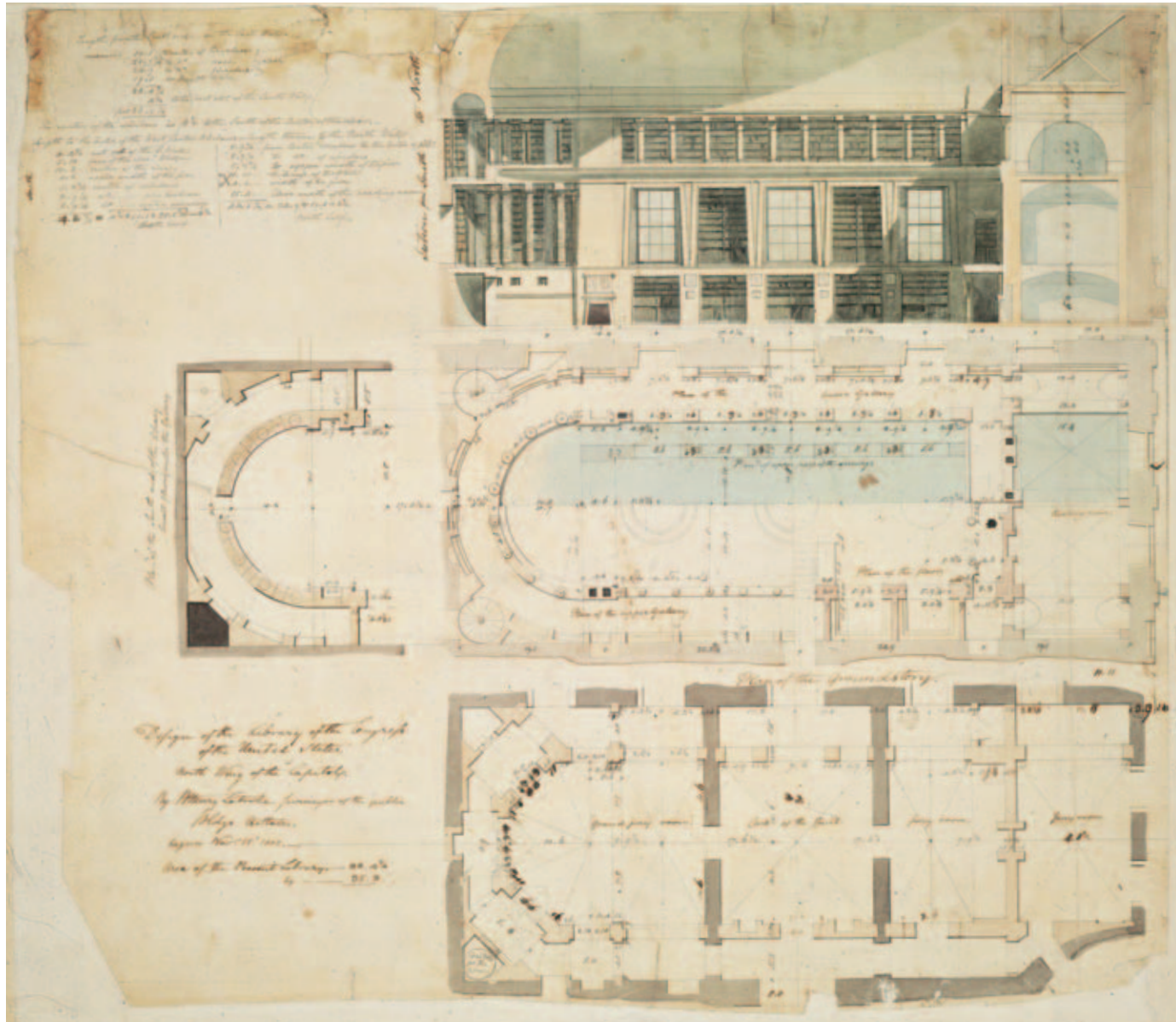
³¹Benjamin Henry Latrobe to the President of the United States, August 31, 1805, in Carter and Jeffrey, *Benjamin Henry Latrobe Papers* (microtext edition).

walls had been so cut down in its lower part that whenever the timber had given way the top must have fallen in the Senate Chamber."³² The letters which passed between Latrobe and Jefferson on this subject show the changes consisted in supporting the girder and replacing portions of the roof and addition of brick partitions instead of wooden partitions. It is easy to account for the decay through the leaky roof and dampness in the basement wall on which the girder rested.

Hadfield, who superintended the greater portion of the construction of this work, was, judging from documents on record, inefficient in the practical details of building superintendence. While a large part of the north wing was constructed under Hadfield's superintendence, the work was completed under the superintendence of James Hoban, and there is nothing to show that Hoban was not most skillful in the services he rendered to the Government. These services extended, with few intermissions, over a period of forty years. Although Latrobe altered the details in many places, it will be seen by a comparison of this portion of the building with the plans that Thornton's scheme was maintained.

Between the years 1807 and 1811 Latrobe made drawings for the exterior of the building, showing his idea for the treatment of the Dome and central portion of the Capitol [Plates 44 and 45], west entrance [Plate 46], and changes in the details of the Senate wing, among which is the Library [Plate 47], located on the west of the Senate Chamber [see Plate 35], as well as a design for a chair for the President of the Senate [Plate 48]. Latrobe made drawings for vaulting with brick the floors of the Senate wing, changing the level of the floors of the Senate Chamber [Plate 49], and providing a room for the Supreme Court in the basement beneath [Plate 50], and building the lobby [Plate 51] of the Senate in brick. In his report of December 11, 1809, Latrobe says

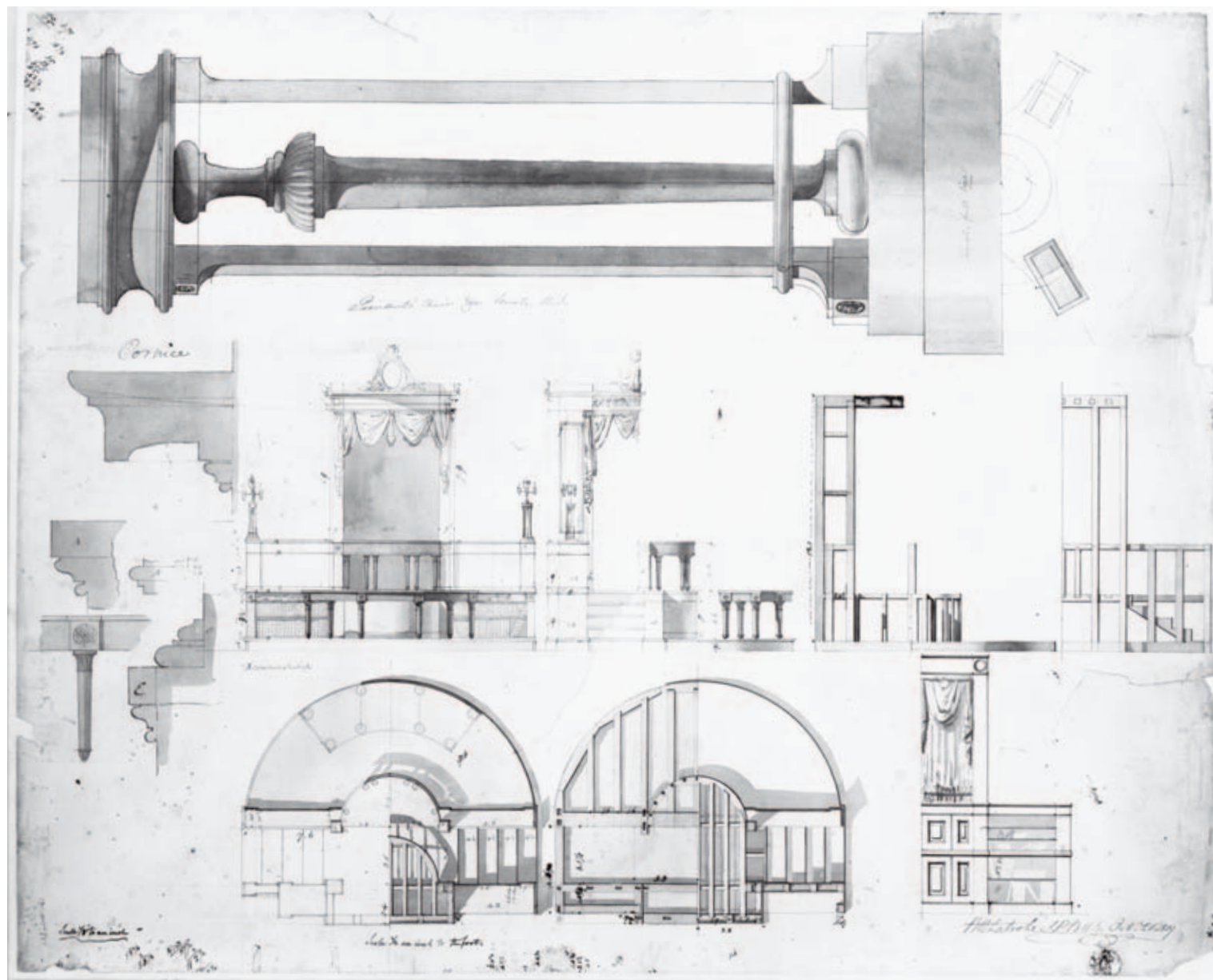
³²Latrobe to Jefferson, December 1, 1808, in Padover, *Thomas Jefferson and the National Capital*, 445-452.



PLAN AND SECTION OF LIBRARY ON WEST OF SENATE, BY LATROBE.

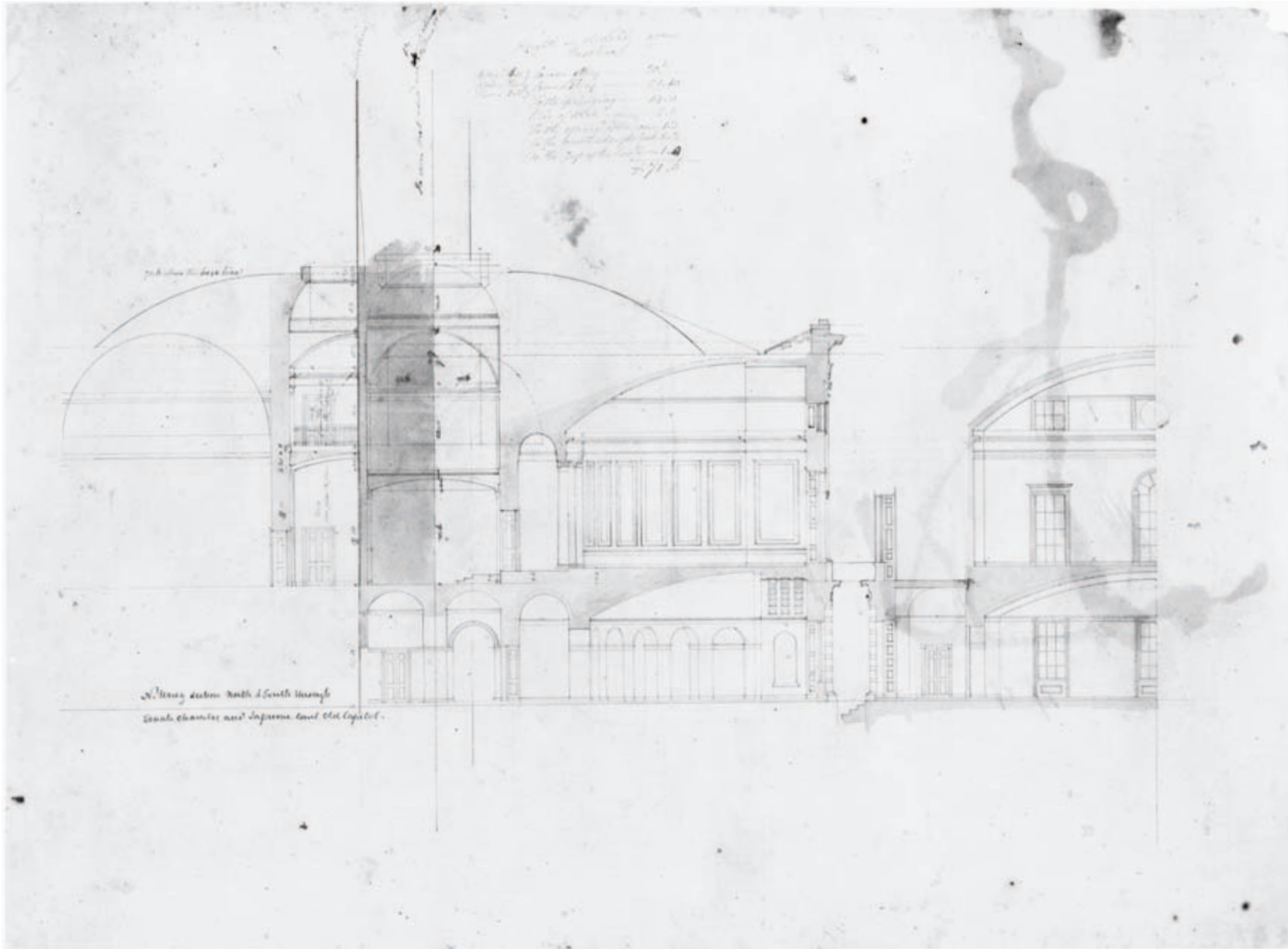
An unexecuted design for the Congressional Library in the Capitol, ca. 1808.

This would have been the first Egyptian Revival style room in America. *Prints and Photographs Division, LC.*



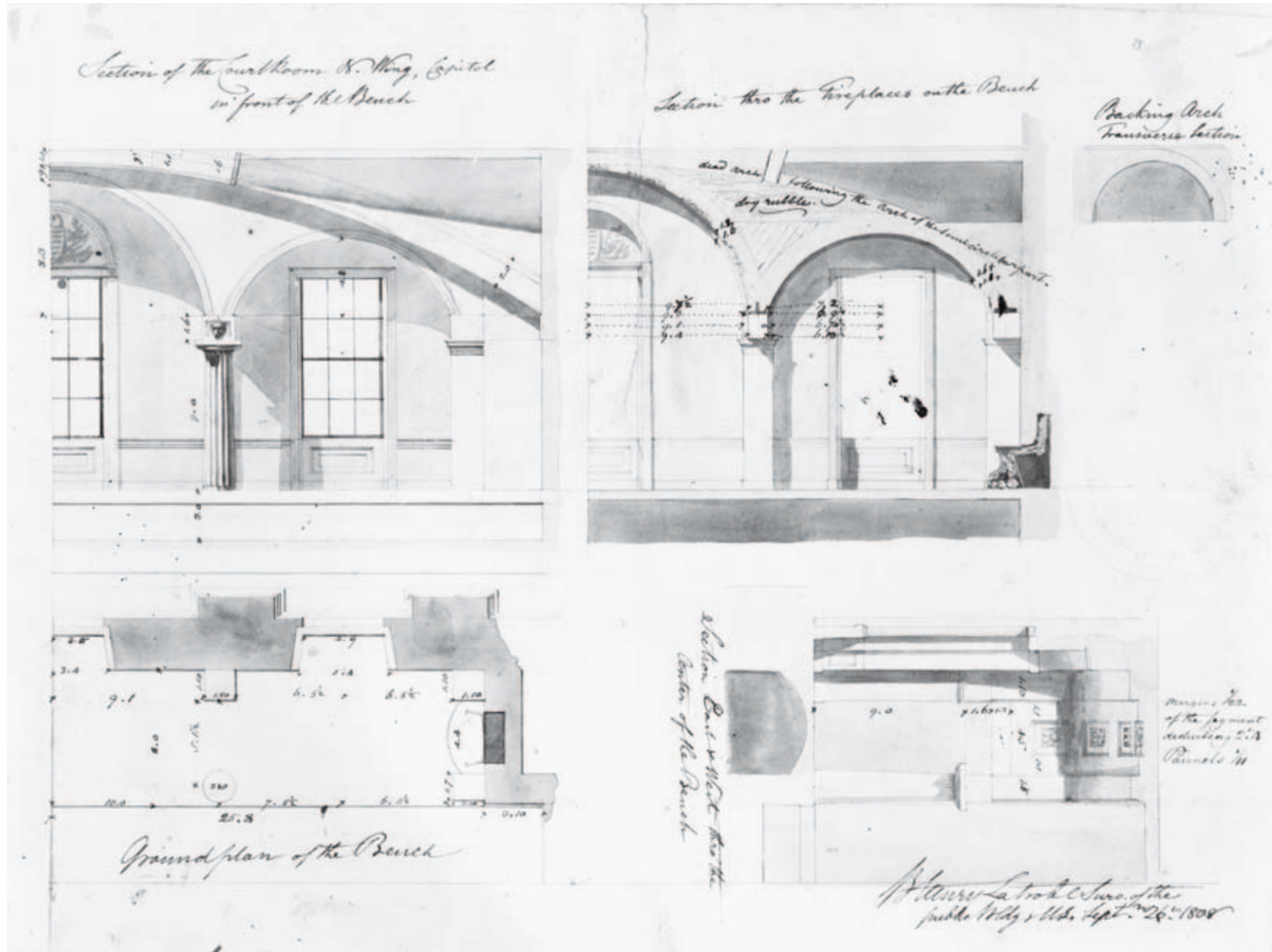
PRESIDENT'S CHAIR U.S. SENATE, LATROBE.

A drawing of furnishings for the Senate Chamber, Benjamin Henry Latrobe, 1809. *Prints and Photographs Division, LC.*



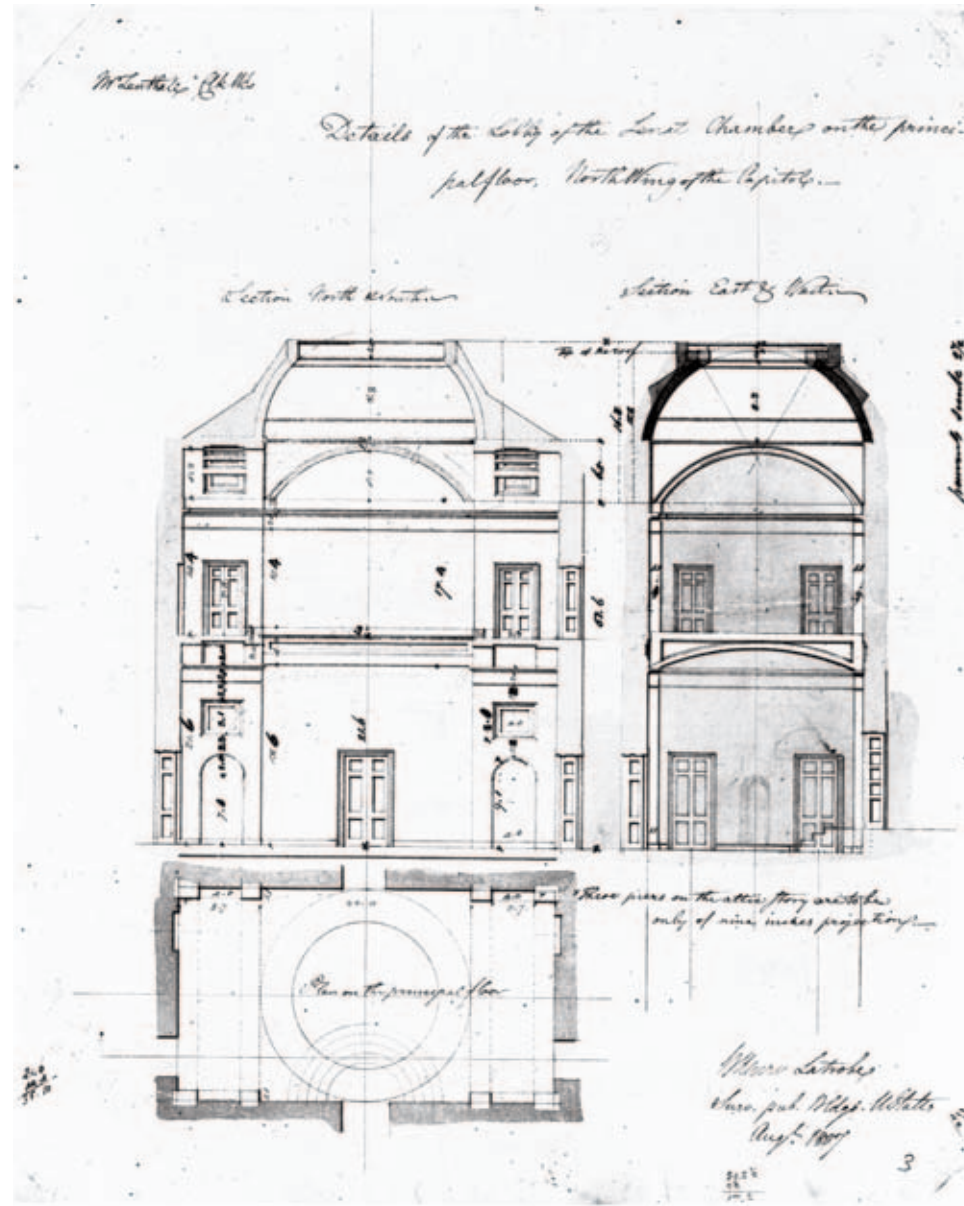
SECTION OF THE SENATE WING—LATROBE ARCHITECT.

Sections through ground and principal stories of the Capitol's north wing looking north and east, 1808. *Prints and Photographs Division, LC.*



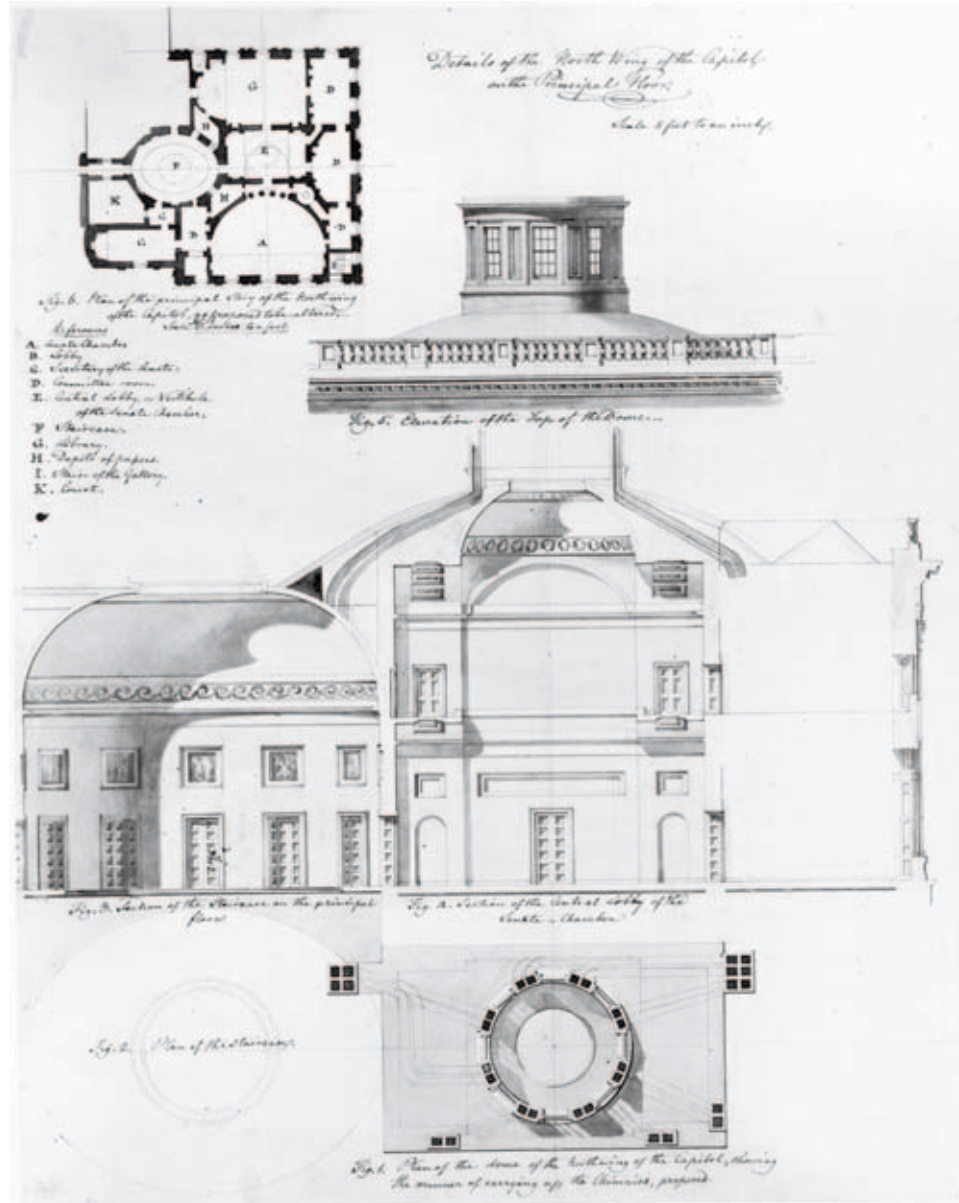
SUPREME COURT, PLAN AND SECTIONS OF BASEMENT—LATROBE ARCHITECT.

Design for Supreme Court room, 1808. Prints and Photographs Division, LC.



LOBBY OF OLD SENATE CHAMBER, LATROBE ARCHITECT.

Plan and sections of Senate Chamber lobby on the principal floor of the old Capitol's north wing, 1807. Prints and Photographs Division, LC.



SECTION THROUGH LOBBY, NORTH WING, SHOWING GROUPING OF CHIMNEY FLUES.

Central lobby and staircase of the old north wing of the Capitol, Benjamin Henry Latrobe, 1807. *Prints and Photographs Division, LC.*

that the work of replacing the wooden construction of the old Senate Chamber, staircase, hall, and lobby was in progress. These changes consisted in raising the floor of the Senate to the principal floor, making a room for the Supreme Court beneath, and vaulting these compartments with brick. This work was completed by the year 1811. The wooden construction was retained on the west side of this wing.³³ The Senate from May 22, 1809, to January 1, 1810, occupied the room used for the Library or room first used by the House of Representatives [Plate 36] while these repairs were in operation, the House having taken up its quarters in the House wing. Plate 52 shows a scheme of Latrobe's to carry the chimneys over a broad arch and group them in a cupola over the Senate lobby; in this way no chimneys were apparent on the exterior of the building. This scheme was not carried out at this period, as the working drawing [Plate 51] shows a modification without the chimneys. After the fire a similar plan with chimneys and cupola was carried into execution.

One of the pieces of original design in the east basement vestibule, Senate wing, on which Latrobe prided himself were the capitals of the "American order," as it has been called.³⁴ The design of the capitals has been repeatedly attributed to Jefferson, but J. H. B. Latrobe quotes one of his father's letters which establishes the authorship. This letter, which was sent to Monticello August 28, 1809, would never have been written to Jefferson if the design had originated with the President:

³³ "The Report of the Surveyor of Public Buildings of the United States in the City of Washington, December 11, 1809," in *DHC*, 151–160.

³⁴ See Thomas U. Walter, "The Orders," *Journal of the Franklin Institute of the State of Pennsylvania and Mechanics Register*, 3rd. ser. I (1841): 194–196. Brown may be referring to the term coined by Walter for Benjamin Henry Latrobe's "American order" columns on the first floor vestibule near the Old Supreme Court Chamber.

"DEAR SIR: I have packed up and sent to Richmond to be forwarded to Monticello a box containing the model of the capital of the columns of the lower vestibule of the Senatorial department of the north wing of the Capitol, which is composed of maize, on a short frustum running about 4 feet from the ground. It may serve for a dial stand, and should you appropriate it for that use I will forward to you a horizontal dial in Pennsylvania marble of the proper size. These capitals during the summer session obtained me more applause from members of Congress than all the works of magnitude or difficulty that surrounded them. They christened them the 'Corn-cob capitals' whether for the sake of alliteration I can not tell, but certainly not very appropriately." [Plate 53.]³⁵

This capital made of freestone is now (1900) in the hall of Monticello. The central portion of the Capitol was not built for many years after Latrobe's connection with the work ceased, yet his drawings made in 1811 of the south and west elevations [Plates 44 and 45], and a perspective in a book of travels by D. B. Warden, published in Paris in 1816, made from Latrobe's drawings of that period [Plate 54], show what should be credited to him for work on the exterior central portions of the building.³⁶ Plate 55, from an old print published in 1808, shows the east front as it appeared at this period. The covered passageway between the wings, as the House wing was not in use, had been evidently removed. The basement, the proportions of the order, covering the principal story and attic, and the fenestration necessarily conformed with Thornton's wing. The eastern portico is a modification and enlargement of the one designed by Thornton [Plate 30]. The broad

³⁵ Latrobe to Jefferson, August 28, 1809, in Van Horne, *Papers of Benjamin Henry Latrobe*, vol. 2, 749–751.

³⁶ David Bailie Warden, *A Chorographical and Statistical Description of the District of Columbia* (Paris: 1816).

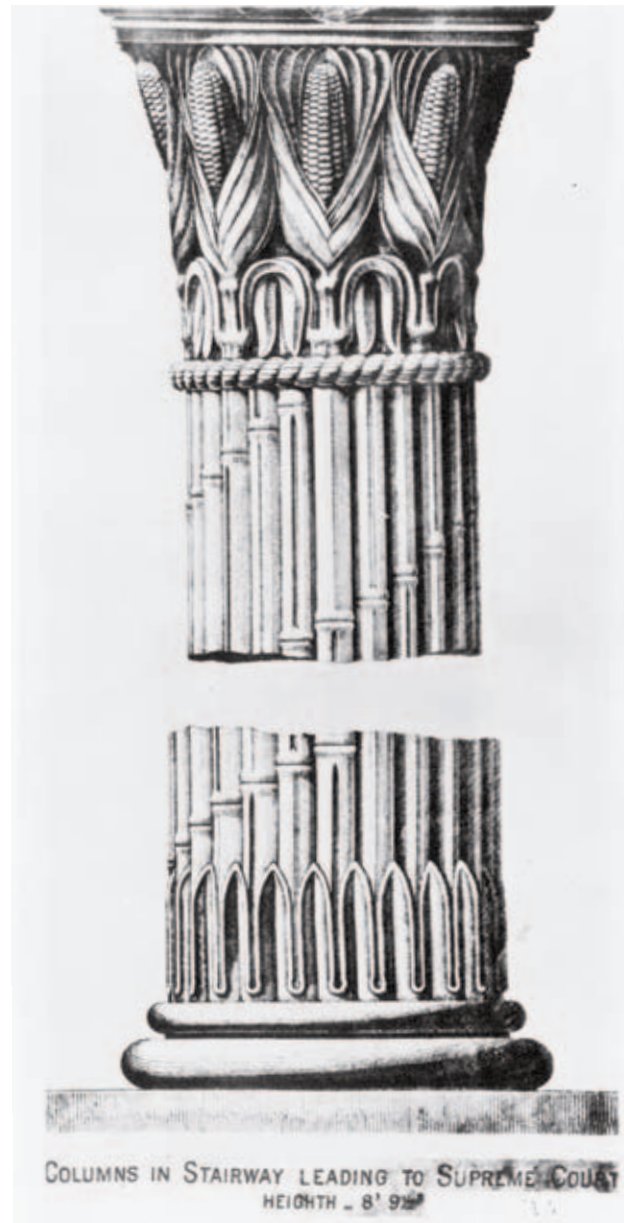
flight of steps from the principal story to the ground, east front, and the colonnade extending to the wings were additions by Latrobe, designed at this period, and finally executed [Plates 45 and 54]. It is constantly asserted in conversation and it has been reiterated again and again in written matter that the principal facade of the Capitol was made on the eastern front because the most important part of the city was expected to be built in that direction. It does not seem reasonable to suppose that the original projectors would have planned the larger portion of the city and parking system, with the President's House and other principal edifices, on the west of the Capitol, at the same time intending or thinking that the principal portion of the city would be on the east of that building. As a matter of fact, the most dignified and impressive front of the original design for the Capitol faced toward the President's House, or west. According to the original plan, the Capitol was visible from the President's House down Pennsylvania avenue. There is no doubt that the most pleasing effect was intended to be produced on this side. Thornton's design had a grand semicircular colonnade or portico in the center of the western front, with a broad sweep of circular steps running from the principal story to the ground [Plates 31 and 32], while he shows a portico on the east with a basement entrance [Plate 30]. Latrobe's drawings, made in 1811 [see Plate 54], show the west portico practically as it stands at the present time. For some reason Latrobe was allowed to change the original design so as to make the principal front on the east. It may have been because there was a tendency at this period (seventeen years after the first design was made) to build the principal residences on the hill.³⁷ The drawing of Latrobe shows [Plate 46] a very crude and peculiar entrance from the west. It is nothing

³⁷ See Glenn Brown, "The Plan of the City and Its Expected Growth," *Records of the Columbia Historical Society* 7 (1904): 114–117. Brown took part in a discussion of "Why the City Went Westward," which was published in the same volume.

more nor less than a small Doric temple at the foot of the hill. The change in the western front indicated on the drawing [Plate 44] was executed, with modifications, by Bulfinch, which materially changed its appearance. The terrace temple was happily omitted. Neither Latrobe's nor Bulfinch's designs are happy alterations of the original. Latrobe modified Thornton's form of dome by increasing the height, but it was not executed on the lines he suggested. Several notes in one of Thornton's pamphlets would indicate that at one time Latrobe contemplated the omission of the central Dome and Rotunda which were features of the original design. He makes Latrobe say: "The entrance will be in the recess. It may seem contradictory when I say that he [Jefferson] directed that I should deviate as little as possible from the plan approved by General Washington," and that "he [Jefferson] approved of the present plan in which by this recess I block out the Dome [in another place he calls it the principal dome, to distinguish it from the dome which Hallet proposed placing over the circular portico], which the General [Washington] directed should be restored when left out by Mr. Hallet. [See Plates 28 and 29.] But if you consider what use this was intended for after his death was announced to a Federal Congress, you will not blame me."³⁸

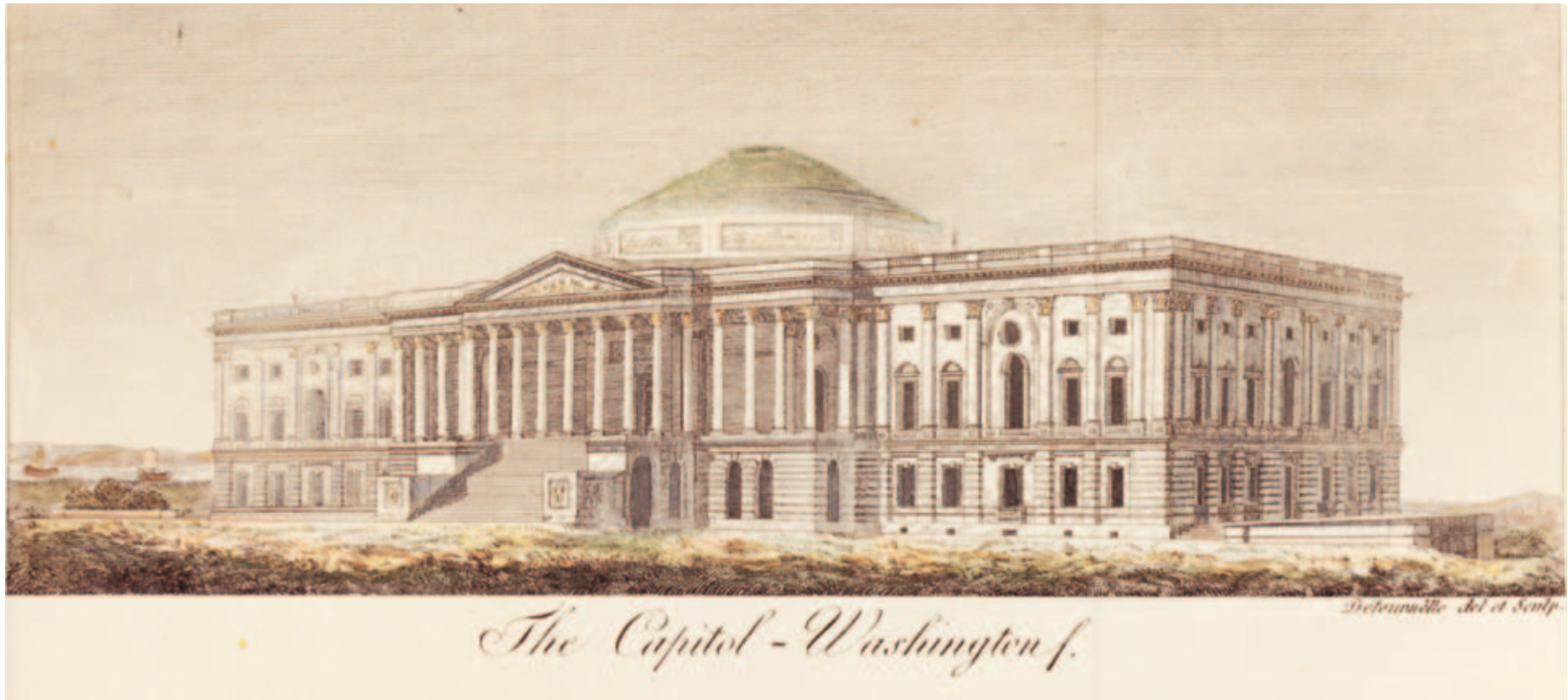
After Washington's death Congress proposed to place a statue of him under the Dome. This plan to omit the Dome does not appear to have been seriously considered, as it was probably opposed by those in authority. The country in 1811 was on unfriendly terms with Great Britain and a war was impending. The Congress sitting in that year ceased to make appropriations for public buildings. The Capitol at this period consisted of two wings, connected by a corridor made of rough boards. [See Plate 56.] The greater part of the foundation of the central

³⁸ William Thornton, *To the Members of the House of Representatives, January 1, 1805*, vols. 3–4, William Thornton Papers, Manuscript Division, LC.



INDIAN CORN COLUMN AND CAPITAL, LATROBE.

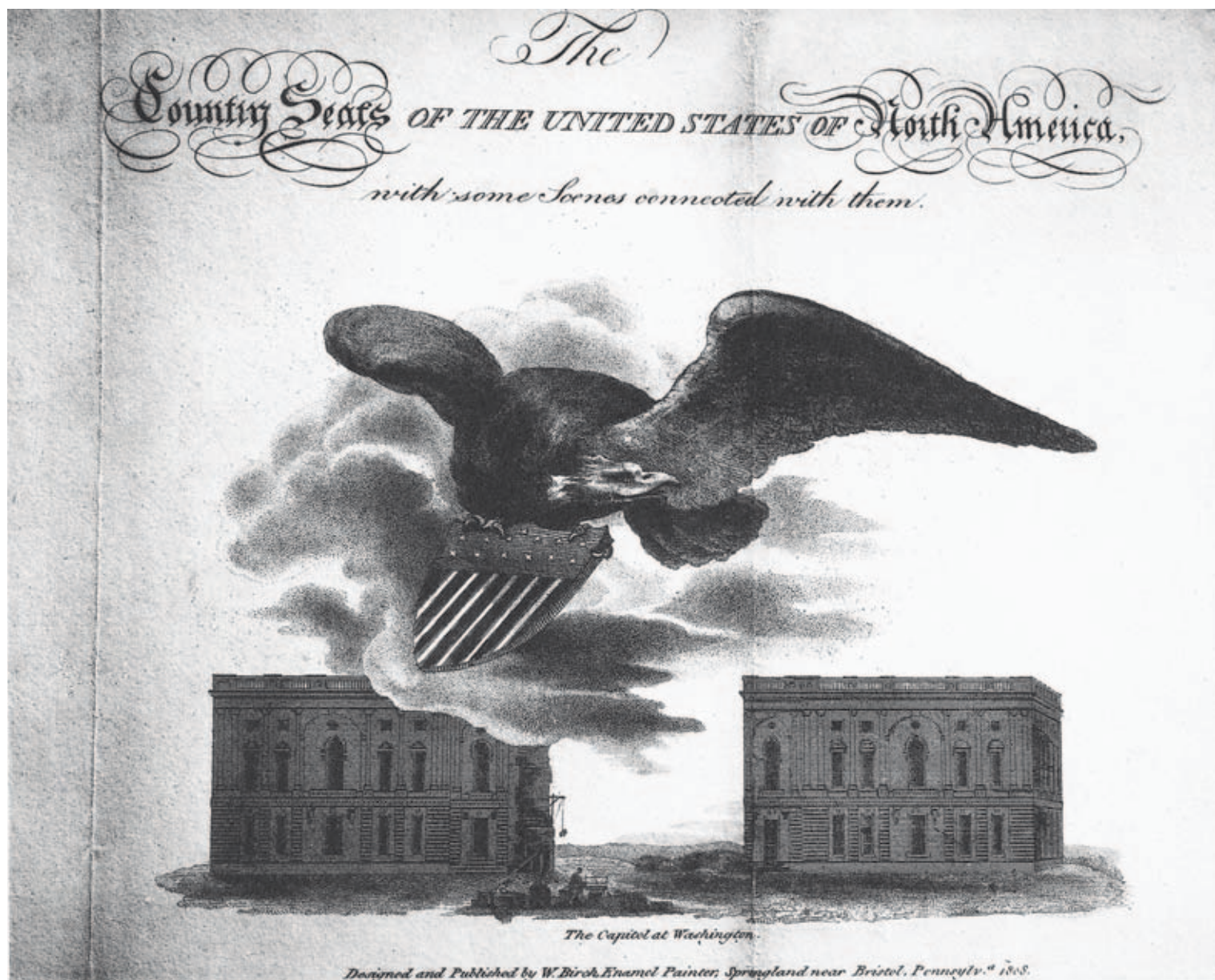
Photograph of an engraving reproduced in the Capitol Extension and New Dome Photographic Books ca. 1860. *Location unknown.*



The Capitol - Washington f.

EXTERIOR VIEW FROM LATROBE'S DRAWINGS.

Engraving published in D. B. Warden, *A Chorographical and Statistical Description of the District of Columbia*, Paris, 1816.



EAST VIEW 1807.

Engraved title page of William Birch's *County Seats of North America* (1808). *Rare Book and Special Collection, LC.*



WEST ELEVATION, 1811 TO 1814.

Conjectural drawing of the appearance of the Capitol from 1811 to 1814 by Glenn Brown, 1900. It is now known that the connecting passage was raised to two stories in 1810. This depiction also shows the two recesses (the six-windowed structures at the ends of the connecting passageway) as being the same size; in fact, the south recess (on the right) was only half-built during this period. *Location unknown.*

portion was in place.³⁹ The surroundings of the Capitol at this time must have been truly forlorn; the grounds and apparently the sidewalks and driveways uncared for, even if they had ever been made. The chairman of the Committee on Public Buildings and Grounds wrote to Latrobe, February 8, 1811, suggesting the importance of leveling an area of 60 feet wide in front for carriages, “which ought to be 100 feet wide,” and carrying a permanent platform on the south wing as far as the gallery door on the southeast corner and on the north to the north door, to facilitate an entrance to the court room. “Except for motives of economy, he would advise the extension of platforms to the western angles of both wings.”⁴⁰

J. H. B. Latrobe (son of the architect), who had a personal recollection of the city at that time, says: “Pennsylvania avenue was little better than a common country road. On either side were two rows of Lombardy poplars, between which was a ditch, often filled with stagnant water, with crossing places at the intersecting streets. Outside of the poplars was a narrow footway, on which carriages often intruded to deposit their occupants at the brick pavements on which the few houses scattered along the avenue abutted. In dry weather the avenue was all dust; in wet weather, all mud. . . . The Capitol itself stood on a steep declivity, clothed with old oaks and seamed with numerous gullies. Between it and the navy-yard were few buildings, here and there, over an arid common. Following the amphitheater of hills from the southeast around to the heights of Georgetown, houses few and far

³⁹ Brown is in error. The central foundation was not put in place until Bulfinch took charge of the work in 1818.

⁴⁰ The letter Brown cites has not been identified. There was no Committee on Public Buildings and Grounds in 1811. Brown may be referring to the House Select Committee on the Expenditure of Monies appropriated for the Capitol, which existed from January 19 to February 6, 1811. This committee was chaired by Joseph Lewis, Jr. (1772–1834), a Federalist representative from Virginia.

between indicated the beginning of the present city. The Patent and Post Offices, in one huge, unornamental, barn-like, brick edifice, occupied the place of their successors [this was Blodgett’s Hotel on E and Eighth streets], and at the other end of the avenue the White House had become a conspicuous object, with the adjacent public offices. Still following the amphitheater around, the eye caught a glimpse of Alexandria and rested upon the broad expanse of water where the Eastern Branch joined the Potomac.”⁴¹

In the month of August, 1814, the British captured Washington, and on August 24 the Capitol and White House were burned. The British intended the complete destruction of these buildings. Happily their efforts were only partially successful. The greater part of the exterior and the principal divisions of the interior resisted their efforts. The soldiers piled the interior of the Senate and House Chambers, as well as the wooden corridor between the wings, with inflammable material and made a great blaze. The wooden floors and roofs were destroyed. The stone columns in the House of Representatives and in the Senate were so badly damaged that it was necessary to take them down. The cornice and balustrade on the exterior were more or less damaged. In this way the interior of the south wing was practically destroyed, as well as the interior of the west side of the Senate wing.⁴² The brick vaults over the Senate, court room, and the halls in the north wing resisted the action of the fire. Andrei, one of the sculptors on the Capitol when the work stopped, made a very interesting drawing, showing the effect of the fire on the sandstone columns in the Hall of Representatives. A reproduction can not do justice to the delicacy of the original, which is in pencil,

⁴¹ John H. B. Latrobe, “The Capitol at Washington at the Beginning of the Present Century.” *An Address by John H. B. Latrobe Before the American Institute of Architects* (Baltimore: William K. Boyle, 1881).

⁴² The first-floor offices, the small House rotunda, and the octagonal vestibule all survived the fire. See “Burning of the Capitol,” RG 40, Subject Files, Curator’s Office, AOC.

emphasized wherever necessary by a delicate wash. The workmen, in repairing or pulling down, were afraid to work until the most dangerous portions of this part of the building were shored up. This drawing indicates the method adopted for shoring, as well as the damage done to the stonework [Plate 57]. At this period Mr. Chittenden, a miniature painter, was in Washington, and he made interesting colored drawings of both the Capitol and President's House, showing the damage caused by the fire on the exterior of the buildings. Plate 58 shows a reproduction of this drawing.

Latrobe gives the following graphic description of the effect of the fire: "In the Hall of Representatives the devastation has been dreadful. There was no want of materials for the conflagration, for when the number of members of Congress was increased the old platform was left in its place and another raised over it, giving an additional quantity of dry and loose timber. All the stages and seats of the galleries were of timber and yellow pine. The mahogany desks, tables, and chairs were in their places. At first rockets were fired through the roof, but they did not set fire to it. They sent men on it, but it was covered with sheet iron. At last they made a great pile in the center of the room of the furniture and, retiring, set fire to a quantity of rocket stuff in the middle. The whole was soon in a blaze, and so intense was the flame that the glass of the lights was melted, and I have now lumps weighing many pounds run into a mass. The stone is, like most freestone, unable to resist the force of flame, and I believe no known material would have been able to resist so sudden and intense a heat. The exterior of the columns and entablature scaled off, and not a vestige of sculpture or fluting remained."⁴³ [Plate 57.]

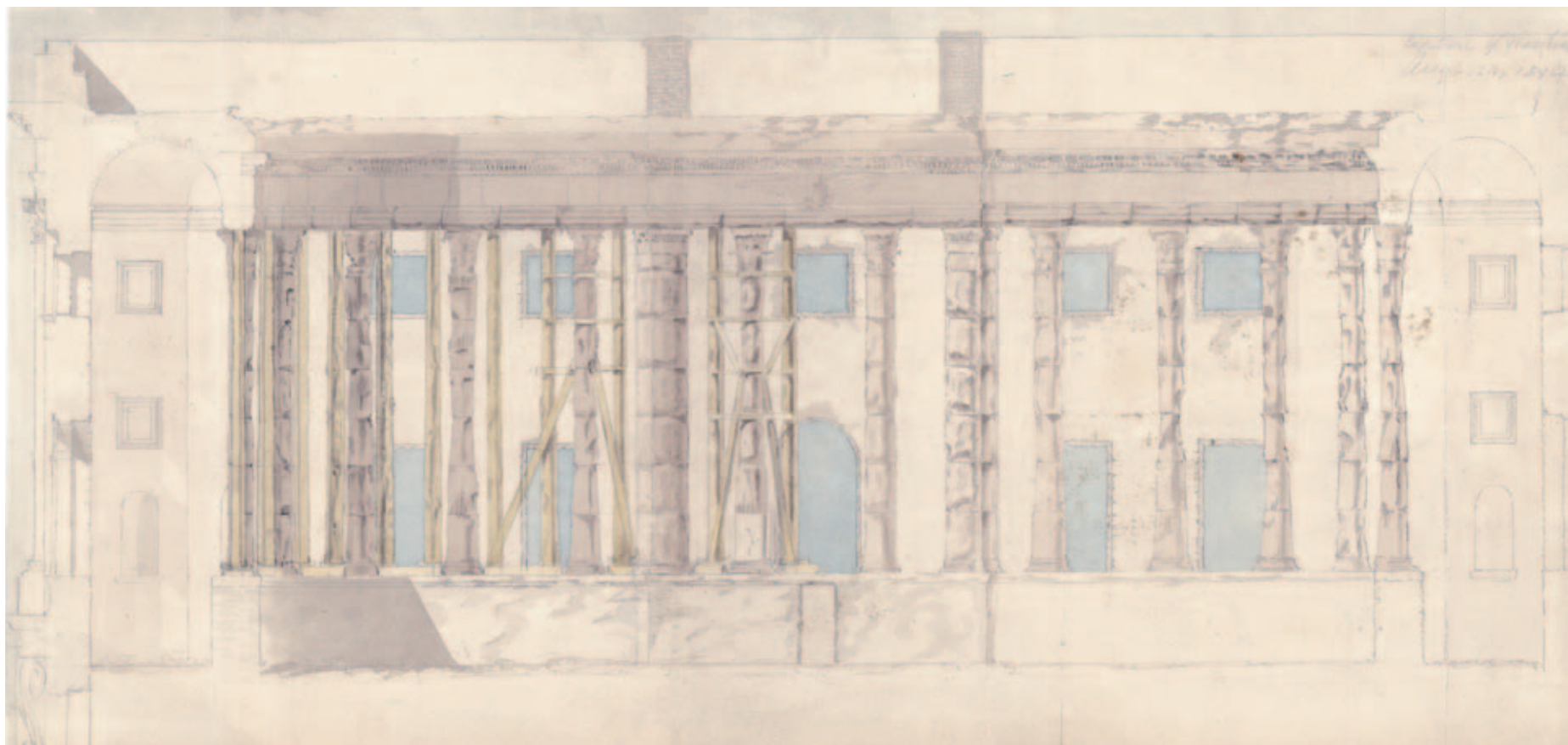
⁴³ Latrobe's description of the fire in the Hall of Representatives is found in a letter to Jefferson, July 12, 1815, in Van Horne, *Papers of Benjamin Henry Latrobe*, vol. 3, 670–671.

The damage done by the fire was not investigated until the war with Great Britain was at an end.⁴⁴ The burning of the Capitol left Congress and the Supreme Court no suitable place for the transaction of business. The Thirteenth Congress met September 19, 1814, in a building erected for a hotel on the corner of Eighth and E streets (the site of the United States Post-Office) by Samuel Blodgett, which in 1814 was used as the Government Patent and Post Office. This building was saved by Dr. William Thornton's exertions, he having been able to persuade the British officers, Ross and Cockburn, that science would sustain a serious loss by the destruction of the patent models and records, which were at this time in his charge. This was the only available building, but the accommodation it afforded was inadequate. The prominent citizens of the District, for fear that Congress might leave the city, organized a stock company known as the "Capitol Hotel Company," to erect a building for the temporary accommodation of Congress. This structure was commenced July 4, 1815, and occupied by Congress from December, 1815, to 1819, while the Capitol was being rebuilt. This building, which is on the corner of A and First streets northeast, has since that period been called the "Old Capitol." It again became noted during the civil war as a prison for Southern sympathizers.⁴⁵

After the fire it was doubtful for some time whether the Federal buildings would be repaired or be rebuilt on some other site or in another city. Many Congressmen thought this a favorable time to remove the seat of government to some city in which they and their constituents were personally interested. Others proposed a change of

⁴⁴ Brown may be referring to Latrobe's professional survey report in 1815. See "Burning of the Capitol," Curator's Office, AOC.

⁴⁵ For a historical photograph and sketch of this once famous Washington landmark, see James Goode, *Capital Losses: A Cultural History of Washington's Destroyed Buildings* (Washington: Smithsonian Institution Press, 1979), 290–292. The structure, razed in the nineteenth century, was replaced by a block of rowhouses on the site of the Supreme Court Building.



DRAWING OF HOUSE OF REPRESENTATIVES, AFTER THE DESTRUCTION BY BRITISH.

Drawing attributed to Giovanni Andrei after the 1814 fire.



EXTERIOR AFTER THE FIRE, FROM DRAWING OF CHITTENDEN 1814.

George Munger, Watercolor, 1814. *Kiplinger Washington Collection.*

site in Washington for both the Capitol and the President's House. A committee was appointed by Congress to consider these questions, and on November 21, 1814, this committee reported in favor of repairing the old buildings, because it would be cheaper, while to remove them would be an injustice to the property owners who had bought lots in the vicinity of these buildings with the idea of their being permanently located.⁴⁶ February 15, 1815, Congress authorized the President (Madison) to borrow \$500,000 to rebuild the public buildings. On the same date Madison appointed three commissioners, John P. Van Ness, T. Ringgold, and Richard Bland Lee, at a salary of \$1,600 each, to superintend their restoration.⁴⁷ March 14, 1815, B. H. Latrobe was requested to call on the new commissioners in reference to retaining the place as principal architectural adviser, which he had held when the work stopped in 1811. When the work ceased on the Capitol Latrobe had gone to Pittsburg, where he was engaged in introducing steamboats on Western rivers, and it is a little strange that Thornton had entered into the same enterprise as early as 1789, when steamboats were not in a sufficiently advanced state for him to make the venture successful. Latrobe's private enterprise, however, prevented his going to Washington to answer the summons of the commissioners as quickly as they thought he should, and on March 31 they wrote a strong protest against further delay.⁴⁸ Latrobe arrived in Washington April 20, 1815, and was

⁴⁶ The Select Committee on Rebuilding the Public Buildings in the City of Washington Operated from October 20 to November 21, 1814. "Burning of the Capitol," Curator's Office, AOC.

⁴⁷ An Act Making Appropriations for Repairing or Rebuilding the Public Buildings within the City of Washington. [*United States Statutes at Large*, vol. 3, 205.] In *DHC*, 185.

⁴⁸ Commissioners of the Public Buildings to Latrobe, March 14, 1815, and Protest from the Commissioners of Public Buildings to Latrobe, March 31, 1815, in Van Horne, *Papers of Benjamin Henry Latrobe*, vol. 2, 634 and 635, n. 3.

appointed to undertake the repairs of the Capitol. On May 16 the commissioners wrote to President Madison: "We have employed Mr. Latrobe as architect or surveyor of the Capitol." In the same letter they state that Latrobe had made a preliminary report on the Capitol, and thought the south wing could be completed before 1816. This letter contains the first suggestion for changing the form of the House of Representatives. A semicircular room, with a segment slightly greater than a semicircle, with committee rooms beneath the galleries, was recommended by the commissioners, and plans on that form were submitted to President Madison for his approval.

After a preliminary investigation Latrobe returned to Pittsburg for six weeks, so as to settle his private enterprises and to bring his family to Washington.

June 29, 1815, Latrobe was requested by the committee in charge to furnish Congress with an accurate statement concerning the labor and materials needed to finish the House of Representatives by December, 1816. This and other committees were doomed to much disappointment, as this portion of the building was not finished for many years.

August 8, 1815, Andrei was sent to Italy, with orders to purchase twenty-four Corinthian capitals for the House of Representatives and four Ionic capitals for columns, with two pilaster capitals for the Senate Chamber, for all of which Latrobe furnished the necessary drawings. These capitals were all to be of the best statuary marble. Andrei was promised an increase in his salary to \$1,500 per annum when he returned to the United States. He was also authorized to engage a sculptor who was proficient in making or modeling figures, and to make arrangements to bring over the sculptor's family. It was about this period (August 26, 1815) that the first mention is made of the columns used in the present Statuary Hall. It was suggested that variegated marble from Frederick County, Md., should be used. In December, 1815, Latrobe made a plat for the grounds surrounding the Capitol, introducing the

landscape effects which he thought desirable in connection with the building, and showing his proposed disposition of the Tiber Creek and the canal, both of which ran near the Capitol [Plate 59].

In the latter part of December, 1815, Latrobe made a request for an architectural assistant, to be paid by the Government. On December 29 the commissioners replied: "It never having been mentioned or even alluded to in the interviews we have had with you, we fairly assumed that it was not anticipated," and consequently they declined to appoint an assistant, but increased Latrobe's salary \$500, making it \$2,500 per annum.⁴⁹

From November, 1815, until Latrobe severed his connection with the Capitol the records show many protests from the commissioners against the slow progress of the work and against his giving too much attention to private matters, for Latrobe had many private interests and enterprises which he was endeavoring to manage contemporaneously with his work on the Capitol. Both he and the commissioners were fretting, the first because he felt under too much restraint, and the latter because Latrobe gave, according to their ideas, too little time and attention to the public work. One of the principal causes of delay was the difficulty found in obtaining the marble columns from the Potomac, and Latrobe suggested sandstone in the place of marble. In a letter of February 26, 1816, the commissioners objected to this change.⁵⁰

Latrobe's plans for the reconstruction of the House wing made at this period are in the possession of the Congressional Library, selections from which are shown in Plates 60 to 64. The drawings show a complete change in the form, design, and details of the interior of this wing of the Capitol. Plate 62 shows Latrobe's idea of a masonry vault, the erection of which Madison overruled. Plate 63 shows a framing

plan of the roof as it was finally constructed. Judging from the plan, elevation [Plate 61], and details [Plate 64], this wing was completed strictly according to Latrobe's drawings. Plate 65 shows Latrobe's drawing for the central portion of the west front.

April 24, 1816, Congress abolished the commission of three who had been put in charge of Government buildings, and authorized the appointment of a single commissioner at a salary of \$2,000 per annum, Samuel Lane, of Virginia, being appointed to fill this position.⁵¹ Congress by the same act gave President Madison power to make any changes that he might think proper in the plans of the Government buildings.

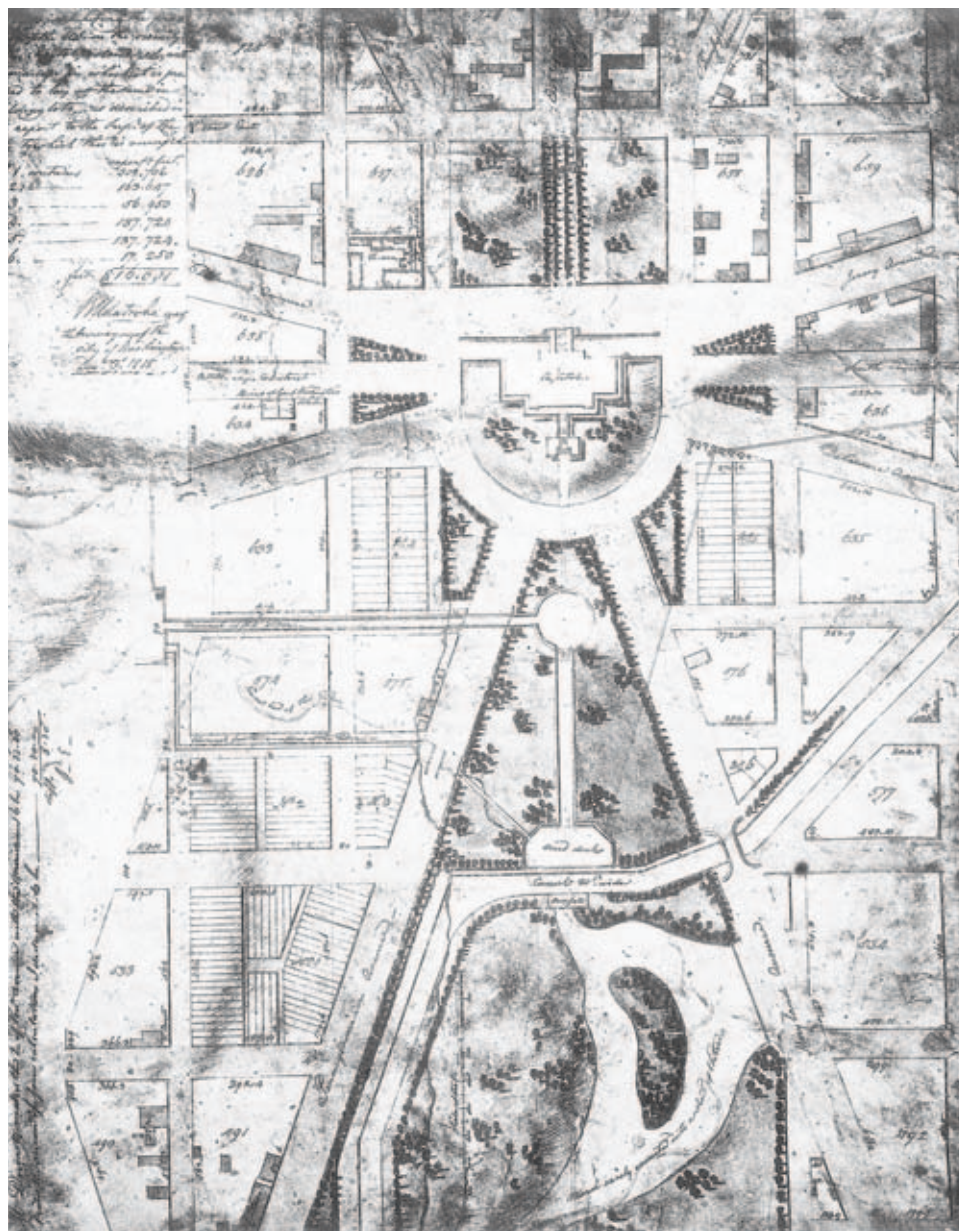
At this period Hoban, in charge of the President's House, and Latrobe, in charge of the Capitol, were requested to give their opinion as to the best material for covering the public buildings. Latrobe named, placing them in the order he considered most meritorious, marble, freestone, zinc, iron, copper. Hoban placed copper first. Madison agreed with Hoban, and copper was selected as the covering. The whole interior of the west side of the north wing having been constructed of timber, and the old shingle roof being over the greater part of the wing, this section of the building was completely destroyed. The columns in the Senate Chamber were burned to lime and everything of freestone was cracked, but the brick dome of the Senate Chamber was entire, while the vaults in the lobby, stairway hall, and Supreme Court were more or less damaged. Latrobe's report to Congress, November, 1816, gives a clear idea of the state of the building at this period.⁵² In the south wing no progress had been made on the interior, because of the

⁴⁹ Commissioners to Latrobe, December 29, 1815, DCC, NARA.

⁵⁰ Commissioners to Latrobe, February 26, 1816, DCC, NARA.

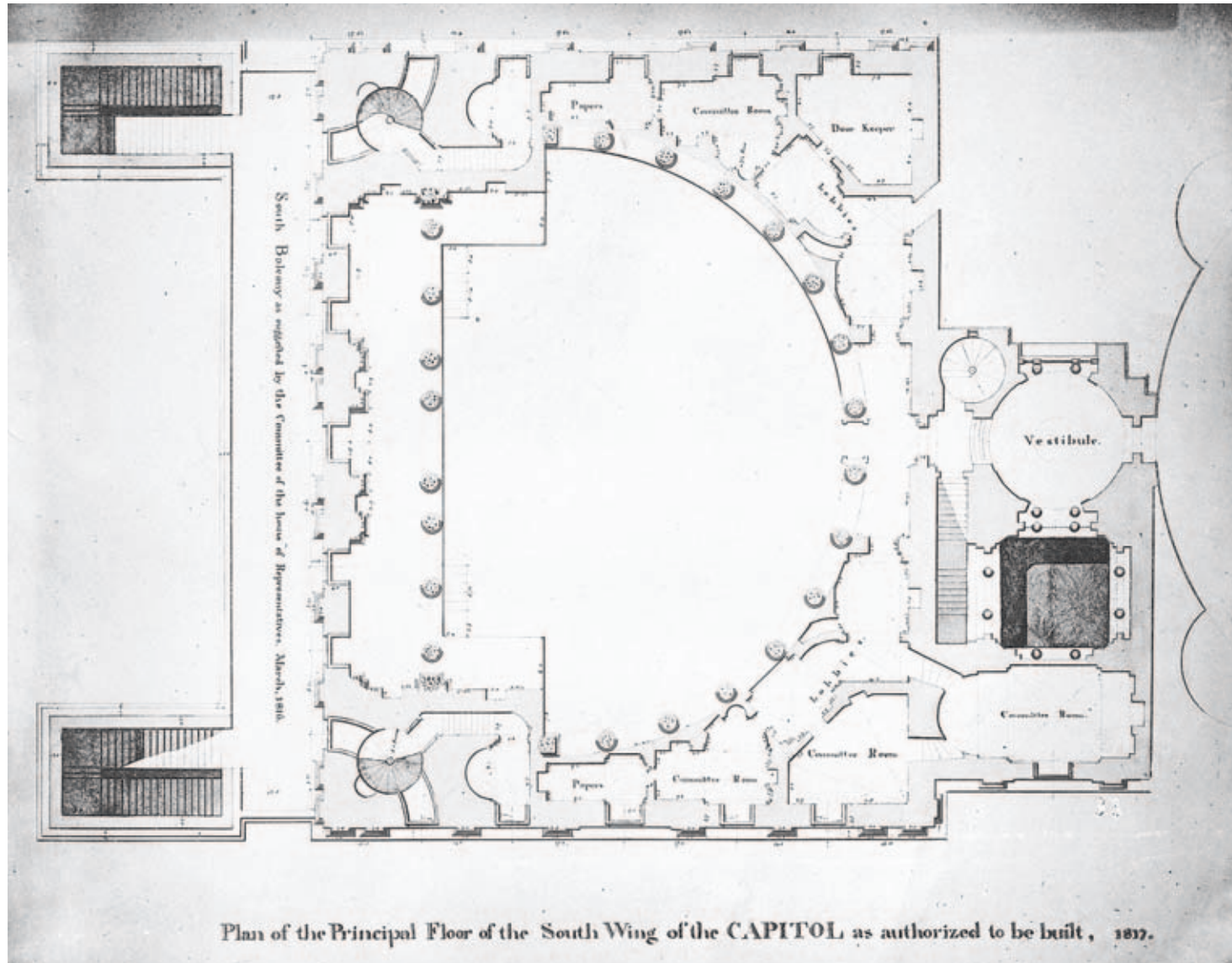
⁵¹ See "Act to . . . Abolish the Office of Commissioners of the Public Buildings, and of Superintendent, and for the Appointment of One Commissioner for the Public Buildings." [*United States Statutes at Large*, vol. 3, 325]. In *DHC*, 189. The act was approved on April 29, 1816, not on April 24.

⁵² "Report on the United States Capitol," November 28, 1816, reprinted in Van Horne, *Papers of Benjamin Henry Latrobe*, vol. 3, 831-835.



PLAT OF GROUNDS 1815.

Map of grounds and city surrounding the Capitol, Benjamin Henry Latrobe. *Geography and Map Division, LC.*



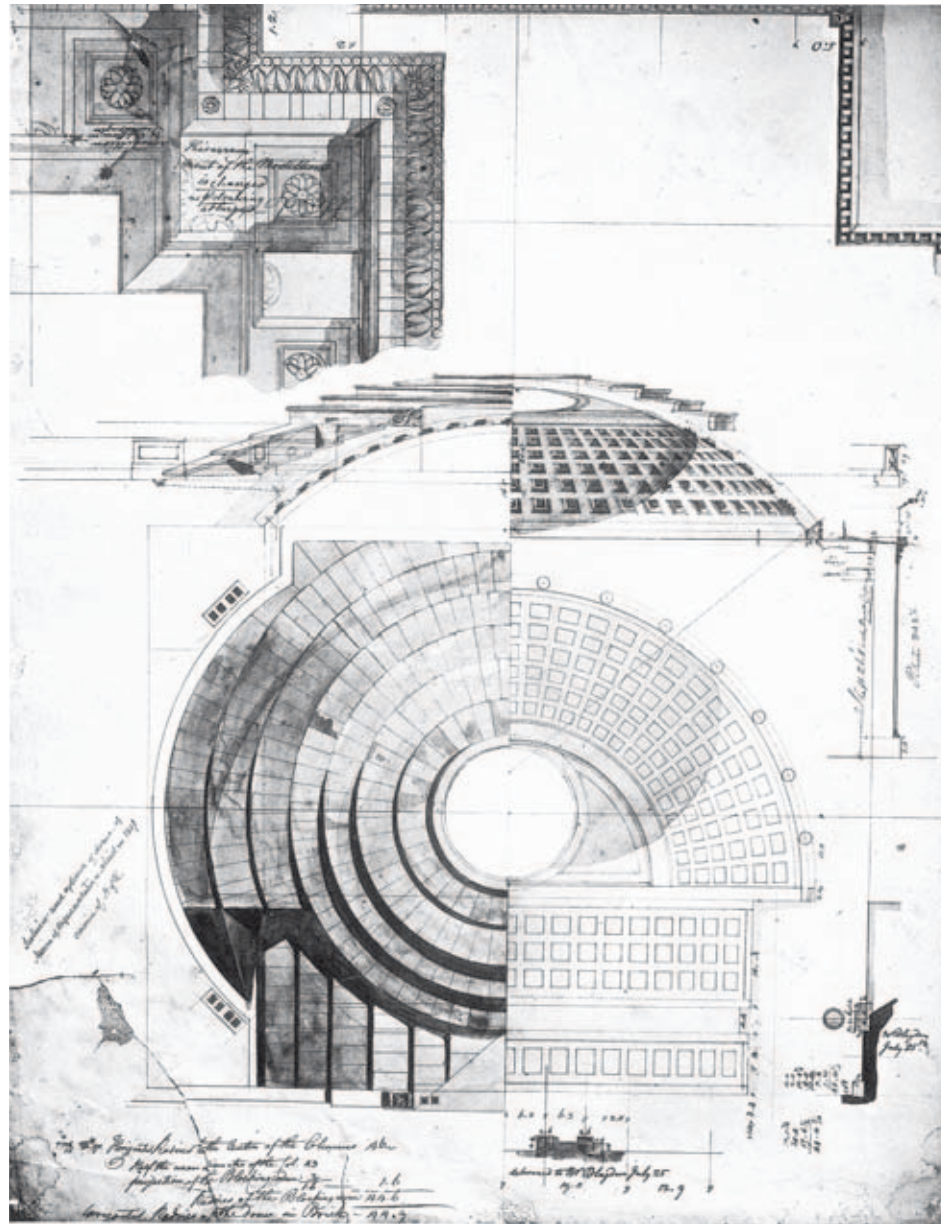
PLAN OF HOUSE OF REPRESENTATIVES AFTER THE FIRE, LATROBE.

Principal floor plan of the south wing of the Capitol, as reconstructed according to the design of Benjamin Henry Latrobe.
 Drawn by Washington Blanchard, June 1817. *Prints and Photographs Division, LC.*

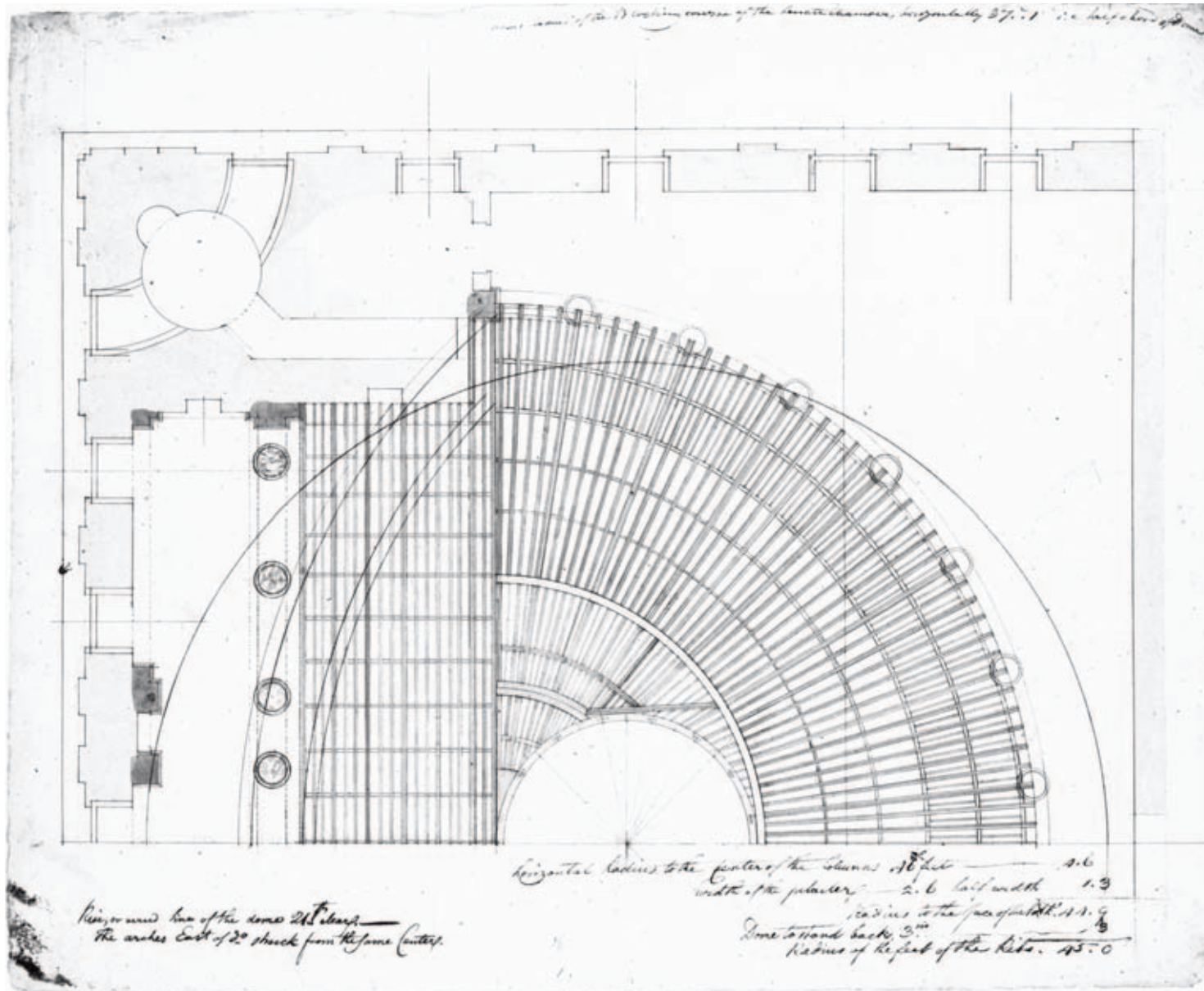


COLONNADE, HOUSE OF REPRESENTATIVES AFTER THE FIRE, LATROBE.

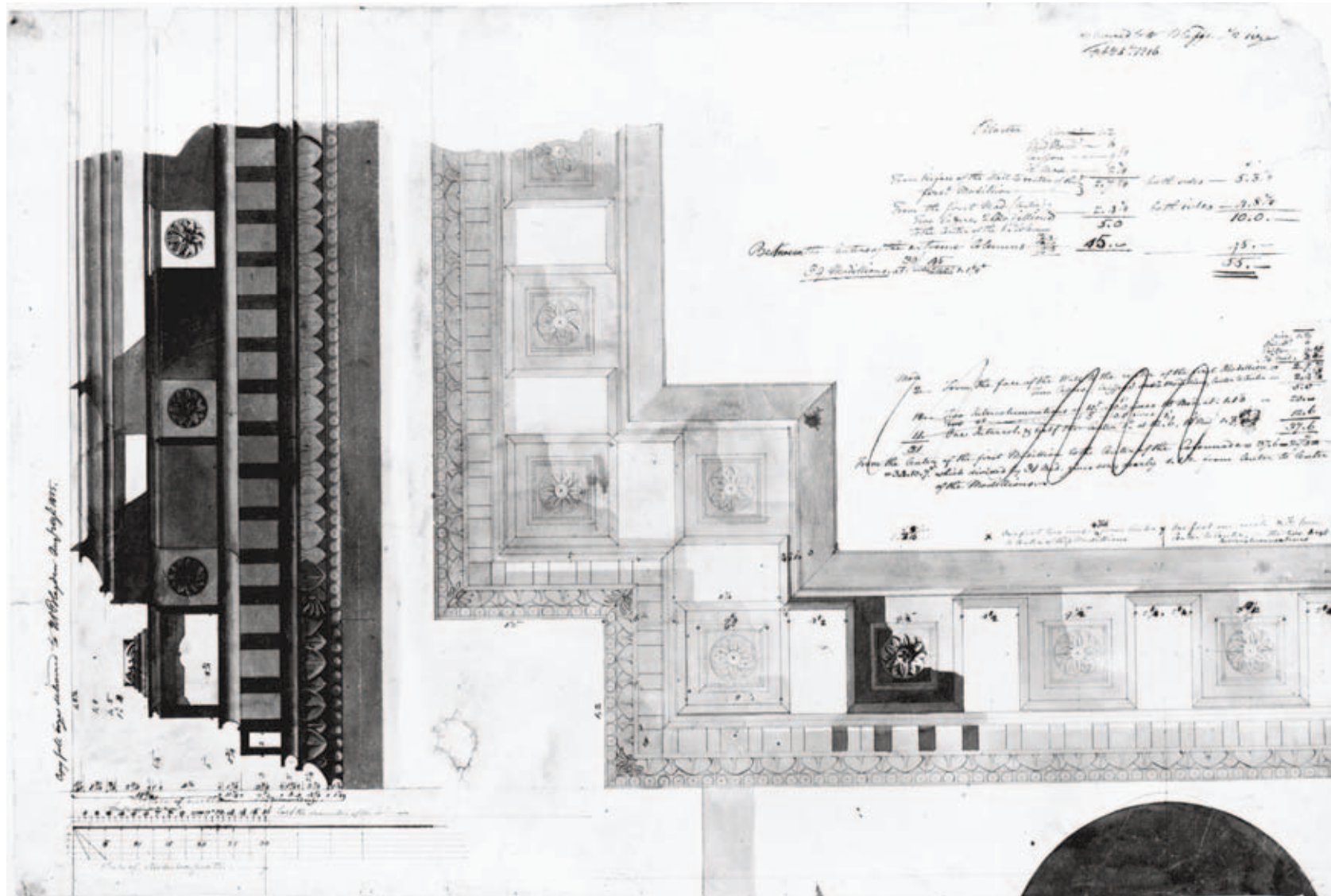
Drawing of the proposed reconstruction of the Hall of the House of Representatives, 1815. *Prints and Photographs Division, LC.*



DRAWING FOR A MASONRY DOME OVER HOUSE OF REPRESENTATIVES, LATROBE.
Drawing of an unexecuted masonry dome, ca. 1817. Prints and Photographs Division, LC.



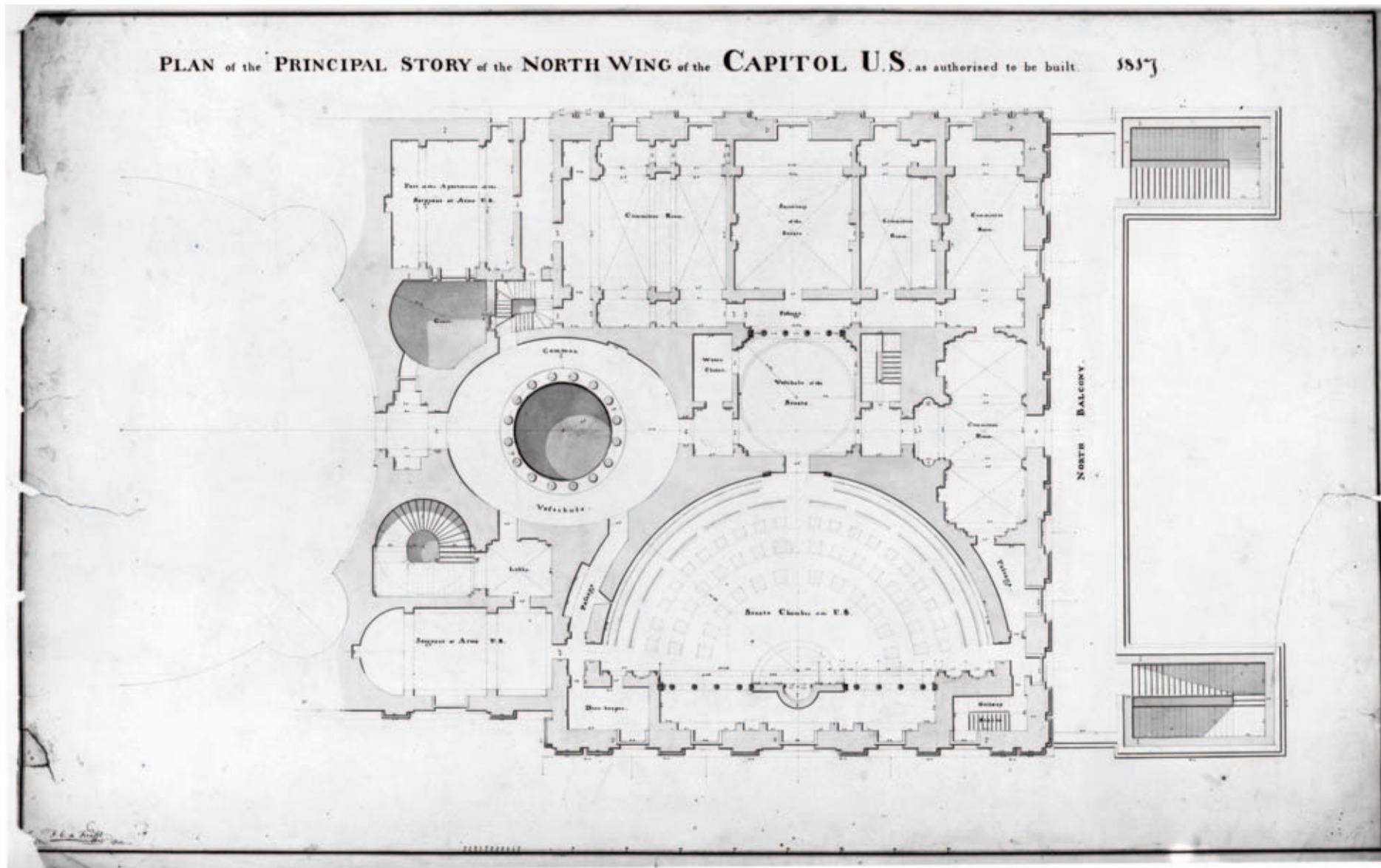
FRAMING PLAN WOODEN DOME, OLD HOUSE OF REPRESENTATIVES.
Latrobe's drawing for the framing, ca. 1817. Prints and Photographs Division, LC.



DETAILS OF CORNICE, OLD HOUSE OF REPRESENTATIVES.
 Latrobe's drawing as executed, 1815. Prints and Photographs Division, LC.

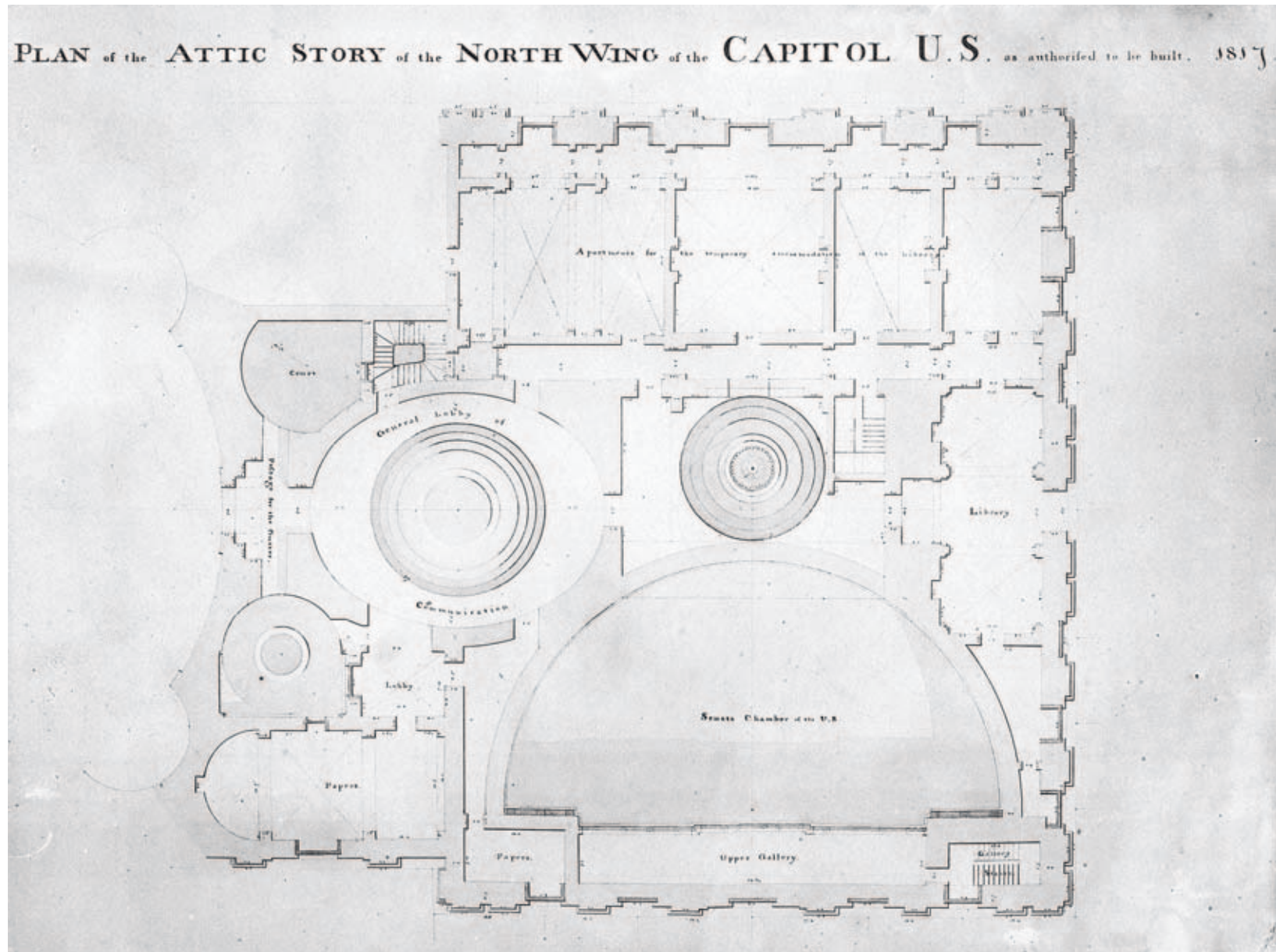


HALF OF CENTRAL PORTION WEST FRONT, LATROBE.
Study drawing, 1810–11. *Prints and Photographs Division, LC.*



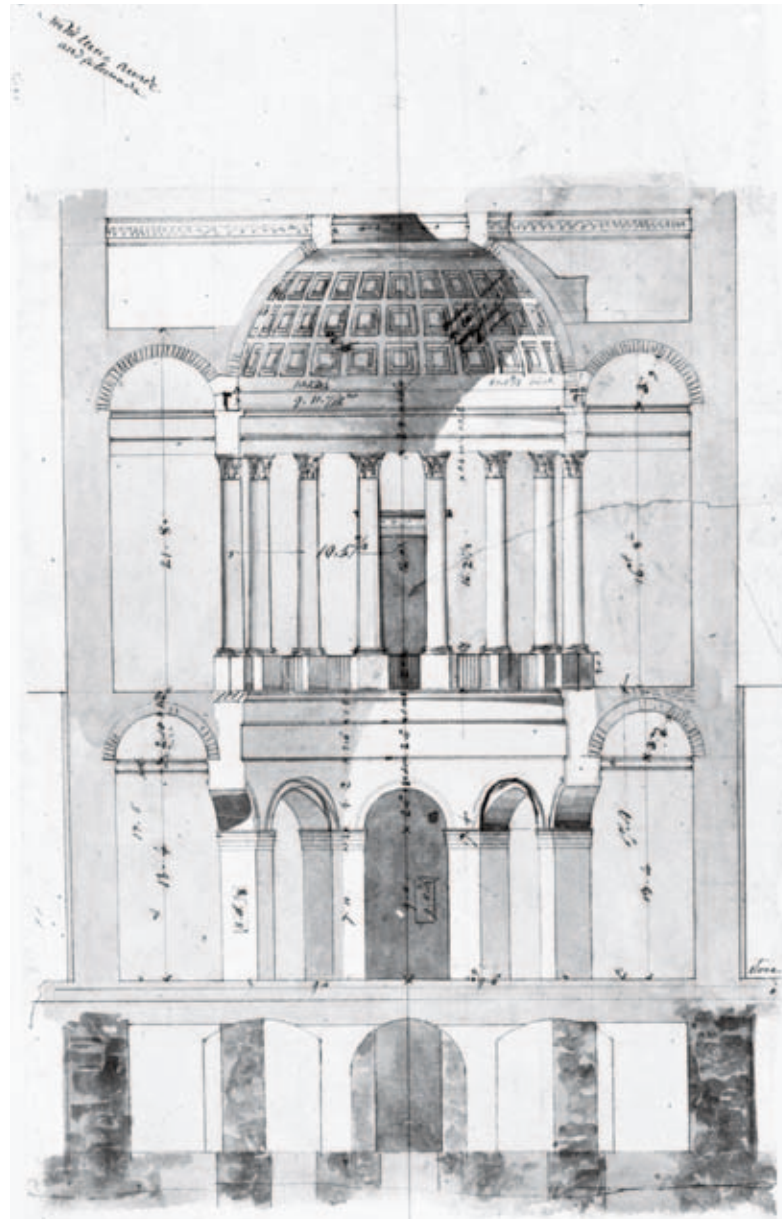
PLAN OF SENATE WING AFTER FIRE, LATROBE.

Plan for the reconstruction of the second story of the Senate wing, 1817. F. C. DeKrafft, delineator. *Prints and Photographs Division, LC.*



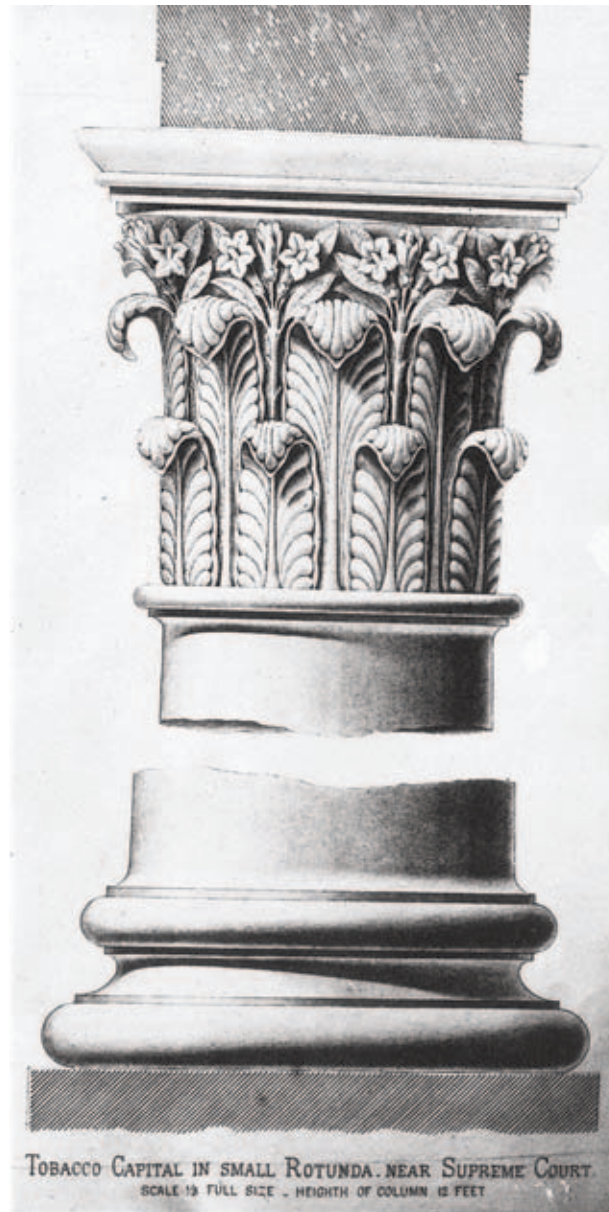
ATTIC PLAN NORTH WING 1817—LATROBE.

Plan for the attic story of the Senate wing. F. C. DeKrafft, delineator. *Prints and Photographs Division, LC.*



SMALL ROTUNDA, SENATE WING, LATROBE.

Ca. 1815. Prints and Photographs Division, LC.



TOBACCO CAPITAL, LATROBE.

Photograph of an engraving included in the Capitol Extension and New Dome Photographic Books, ca. 1860. *Location unknown.*

difficulty in getting stone, but externally all damage done by the fire had been repaired. Just before retiring, the three commissioners adopted alterations in the north wing suggested by Latrobe. One of the alterations consisted in the enlargement of the Senate wing so that it would encroach upon the central space. It will be remembered that this was one of Latrobe's suggestions against which Thornton protested early in 1800. August 22, 1816, President James Madison recorded his objection to this part of the alteration. The Senate and President finally agreed upon an enlargement of the Senate Chamber itself without enlarging the wing so as to interfere with the central space. September 19, 1816, Samuel Lane, the commissioner of public buildings, directed Latrobe to proceed with an enlargement of the Senate Chamber. It will be remembered that this was a point Thornton advocated with persistence at the beginning of the work.

Latrobe says in a report, 1816: "In pursuance of the order, it was necessary to take down the vaults which had been constructed on the west of the house [Senate wing] and raise them to the principal floor. . . . The ruinous state of the building further required that the dome of the center vestibule, the colonnade, and all the vaulting of the court room and the dome of the great stairs, with all the walls as far as they were injured, should be taken down. The enlargement of the Senate Chamber required the great dome of the apartment and its semicircular wall to be entirely removed, and the arches and walls of the two committee rooms and the lobby adjoining the Chamber could also be demolished."⁵³ Madison took an active interest in the construction of the Capitol and did not hesitate to express his opinion on matters of

⁵³United States Congress, House Committee on the Public Buildings, "City of Washington: Progress Made in Rebuilding the Public Edifices," in *American State Papers: Miscellaneous*, vol. 2, 426–438. Brown quotes Latrobe's report of November 28, 1816, describing the Capitol's north and south wings after the fire of 1814 and reporting the progress on their reconstruction. Van Horne, *Papers of Benjamin Henry Latrobe*, vol. 3, 834.

design and construction. August 29 he objected to Mr. Latrobe's idea of a brick dome over the Senate Chamber, because the former arch had pressed out the walls 3½ inches. Madison was justified in such opposition by the trouble Latrobe had previously had with similar but much smaller arches. Mr. George Blagden also felt certain that the walls would not hold such an arch. All interior work in the Senate wing (except the roof and ceiling of Senate Chamber) was ordered replaced by solid masonry. Latrobe's drawings for the north wing [Plates 66 to 69] show that the interior of the wing of the building was reconstructed from them on the lines of Thornton's original plan. The plans [Plates 66 and 67] show this portion of the building as it stands to-day with very slight alteration. Plate 68 is a section through the light shaft or small rotunda where Thornton placed the principal staircase in the hall of the Senate wing. It is on these columns that Latrobe introduced his tobacco-plant capitals [Plate 69]. In a letter of February 16, 1817, explaining the reasons for delay on the work and the increased cost of the undertaking, Latrobe describes the following alterations: "Very extensive improvements of the Senate Chamber were suggested by the Senate and ordered carried out by the President [Madison]. To carry out the order it was not only necessary to take down work which had been constructed the preceding season, but the enlargement of the Senate Chamber required that the great dome of that apartment and its semicircular wall should be taken down, and that the arches and walls of the committee rooms and the lobby adjoining the Chamber should be entirely abolished, and much additional strength and solidity given to the whole structure. This produced the loss of one season's work on the north wing and took another season in undoing what had already been done."⁵⁴ The Capitol had been heated by stoves and furnaces, and

⁵⁴Commissioner Samuel Lane to Samuel Condict, chair of the Committee on Expenditures on Public Buildings, February 15, 1817, published in *DHC*, 196. Brown misdated the letter and misidentified its author.

there are several letters inquiring into the merits of different kinds of stoves. It was April 2, 1817, before the order was issued that the domes over both the House of Representatives and the Senate Chamber of the Capitol should be of wood.

April 5 President Madison authorized the employment of two skilled draftsmen to assist Latrobe, with the hope that in this way the work would progress more rapidly.⁵⁵

During the spring and summer the work progressed slowly, according to the opinion of Congress and other interested parties. From early in April until the fall Latrobe made a weekly report to President Madison, showing the number of men at work at the end of each week. The number employed varied from ninety to a hundred. The columns of Brescia, secured from quarries on the Potomac in Loudoun County, Va., and Montgomery County, Md., in the House of Representatives, now Statuary Hall, seem to have given Latrobe considerable trouble, because of the difficulty he found in getting them quarried and cut. September 24, 1817, the north wing was still without its roof covering, the entablature was not complete for the House of Representatives, the columns in the Senate were not up, and the doors and woodwork were still unordered. Samuel Lane, on October 31, 1817, made Capt. Peter Lenox clerk of works of the Capitol. Lenox was transferred from a similar position at the President's House, and Charles Davis, who occupied the position at this time on the Capitol, was sent to the President's House. Latrobe, in a letter to Lenthall, 1806, stated that Thomas Jefferson favored Lenox's appointment to this position in 1803, but allowed Latrobe to make his own selection at that time.

Latrobe protested against the removal of Davis, but Commissioner Lane insisted, as he thought for the sake of expediency and economy

⁵⁵ James Monroe to Samuel Lane, April 4, 1817, in *DHC*, 198–199. Brown mistakenly identified Madison as the correspondent.

the change was necessary. He accuses Latrobe of often recommending men in every way unsuitable for the work, and he transferred Captain Lenox from the Executive Mansion to the Capitol “from a conviction of his abilities in every branch of the business which he would have to perform, and the proof he has lately furnished of activity and success in the prosecution of the work at the President's House. My anxious desire is to accelerate, not retard, the work at the Capitol. Knowing my duties, I shall scrupulously perform them. All I wish of you is attention to your own.”⁵⁶ The appointment of Peter Lenox against the protest of Latrobe was the cause of Latrobe's sending in his resignation to President Madison, who does not seem to have raised any objection to this action, but referred it to the commissioner, through whom it should have come.⁵⁷

The commissioner answered as follows:

NOVEMBER 24, 1817.

B. H. LATROBE.

SIR: Having seen your letter to the President of the United States, resigning the appointment of Architect of the Capitol, I have to inform you that your resignation is accepted and to request that you will deliver to Captain Lenox all the books, plans, instruments, etc., belonging to the public in your possession.

Yours,

SAMUEL LANE,
*Commissioner of Public Buildings.*⁵⁸

Latrobe had nothing further to do with the supervision of the Capitol, although the larger portion of his designs in reference to

⁵⁶ Samuel Lane to Latrobe, October 31, 1817, in Van Horne, *Papers of Benjamin Henry Latrobe*, vol. 3, 962–963.

⁵⁷ James Monroe became President in March 1817. Brown often confused Madison with Monroe in this chapter.

⁵⁸ Samuel Lane to Benjamin Henry Latrobe, November 24, 1817, in Carter and Jeffrey, *Papers of Benjamin Henry Latrobe* (microtext edition).

interior work were carried out with but little change. Latrobe left his personal impress on the work as a designer as well as a superintendent. He made the original design for the reconstruction of the interior of the south wing or old Hall of Representatives and the Senate Chamber. He changed the western front of the central building and modified the portico on the east, as I have previously mentioned [Plates 45, 54, and 70].

He added the domical roof with cupolas over each wing. Plate 70 gives a plan of the principal floor of the building as he proposed (1817) to have it completed.

William Strickland and Robert Mills, both of whom afterwards became prominent architects, worked on the Capitol as draftsmen for Latrobe.