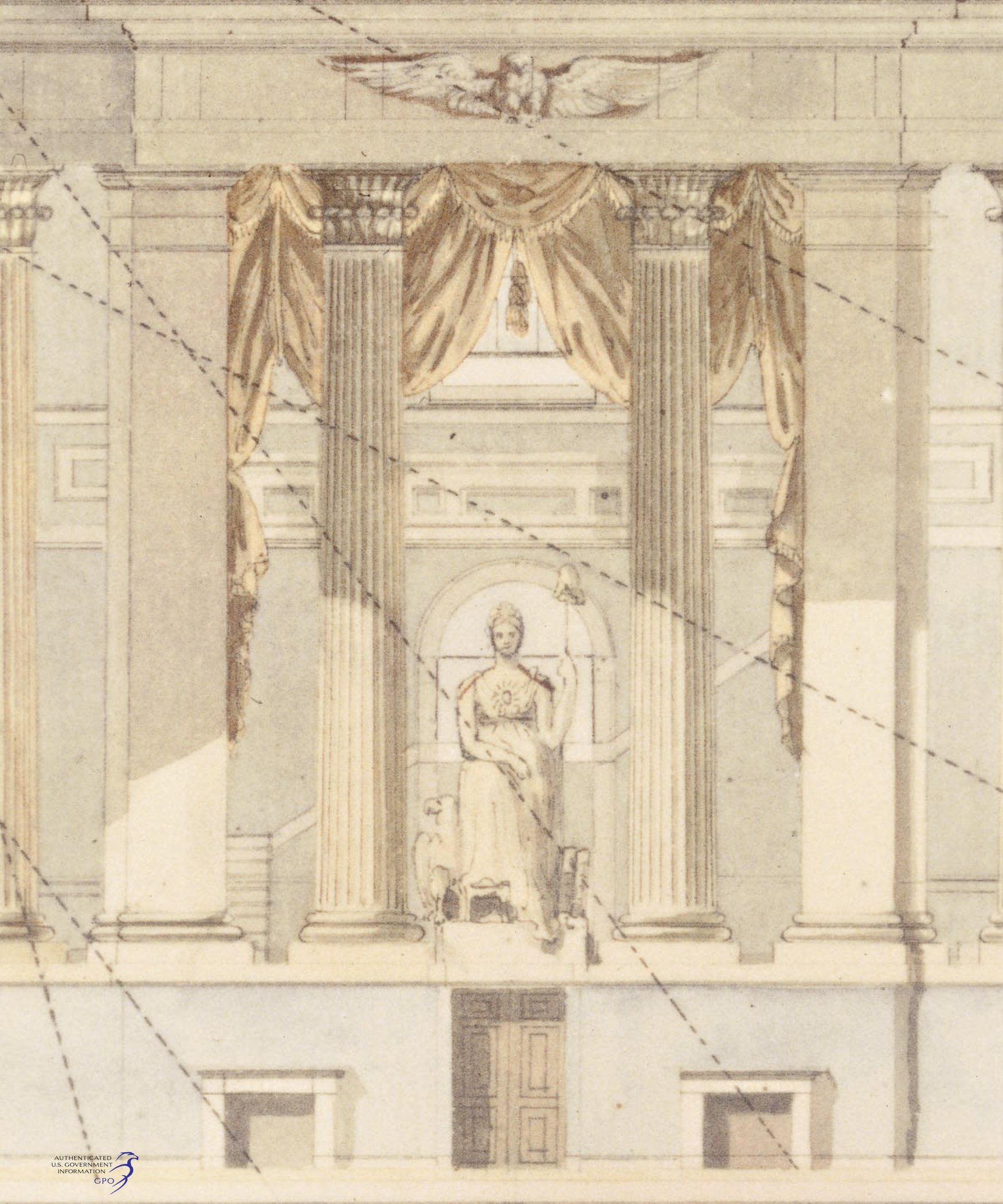

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JEFFERSON AND LATROBE

Few people had such an enduring influence on the Capitol's early history as Thomas Jefferson. He nurtured the compromise that led to passage of the Residence Act and counseled President Washington throughout the process of selecting a design for the Capitol. He presided over the conference that put one man's floor plan into another man's exterior elevation. As president he approved the congressional action abolishing the old board of commissioners, freeing him to personally direct future construction. Until his retirement in 1809, Jefferson managed affairs at the Capitol with the same care and attention he lavished on his beloved Monticello, and later on the University of Virginia. Working with the president was B. Henry Latrobe, an architect of exceptional ability and experience. Theirs would be an association without parallel in the history of the Capitol.

The act of Congress abolishing the board of commissioners transferred its duties to a superintendent of the city of Washington. On June 2, 1802, Jefferson appointed Thomas Munroe, the clerk of the old board, to the new office. Munroe was apparently a man of few words: his entire annual report for 1802 ran just two sentences. He recorded that there were about 830 private buildings in the city—100 more than the previous year—and that the condition of the public buildings had not materially changed.[1]

Although Munroe did not report any problems with the public buildings, the roofs of the President's House and the Capitol needed repair. They were said to be "so leaky as to threaten both edifices with ruin."[2] On February 12, 1803, New York Congressman Samuel Mitchill offered a resolution in the House of Representatives calling for an investigation into the state of the public buildings: he said they were near a state of "ruin and dilapidation." In addition to maintenance problems, the House was about to gain thirty-eight new members as a result of the 1800 census and the admission of Ohio into the Union. John Dawson of Virginia wanted a provision added to provide more space for the future accommodation of Congress. A colleague from the Old Dominion, Richard Brent, said that an architect had already estimated the cost of finishing the south wing beyond what had already been spent for the "oven." The estimate, he believed, was $40,000. Either George Hadfield or James Hoban prepared the estimate but there is no record of what it covered. The figure was too low to finish the south wing and more likely indicated the money needed for one season's work.

Section of the South Wing (Detail)
by B. Henry Latrobe, 1804
Library of Congress

On March 3, 1803, President Jefferson approved an appropriation of $50,000 for the "repairs and alterations in the Capitol . . . for the accommodation of Congress in their future sessions."[3] It was understood that $5,000 to $10,000 was meant for repairs to the Capitol and President's House while $40,000 to $45,000 would be available to begin construction of the south wing. Coming twelve years after passage of the Residence Act, this appropriation was the Capitol's first.

Soon after he signed the appropriation bill, Jefferson wrote B. Henry Latrobe, America's foremost architect/engineer, offering him the position of "surveyor of the public buildings." The job was not a permanent government office, but a temporary position necessary to carry out the intent of the appropriation. The president informed Latrobe that the appropriation was to be expended under his direction, but that Munroe would keep the accounts and provide administration. He wanted work to begin in April, so if Latrobe accepted the position, he should make a "flying trip" to start ordering stone from Aquia.[4]

Along with his official letter, Jefferson enclosed a private note saying that he expected another appropriation for the south wing in 1804, which he thought would be enough to finish it. (Why Jefferson thought it would take only two years to build the south wing is not easily understood.) While Latrobe's work on the south wing might therefore seem short-term, other projects in Washington suggested the "probability of a very steady employment for a person of your character here." Jefferson mentioned his dry dock proposal for the Navy Yard as one example of potential projects that could earn Latrobe additional income.[5] Although the president had known Latrobe since 1798 (both were members of the American Philosophical Society), their collaboration had begun over plans to build a dry dock to house twelve frigates at the Washington Navy Yard. In 1802, Jefferson asked Latrobe for help in designing the dry dock because the architect's work on the Philadelphia waterworks had

Statue of Thomas Jefferson

by Pierre Jean David d'Angers, 1833

Received in 1834, the bronze portrait of Jefferson was the first statue placed in the Capitol's rotunda. It was a gift to the nation from Uriah P. Levy, a Jewish naval officer who admired Jefferson's stand on religious freedom. Levy and his family also honored Jefferson by preserving Monticello, which they owned from 1834 to 1923.

Jefferson hoped the public buildings in the federal city would educate fellow citizens about classical architecture, elevating their taste at home and their reputation abroad. As secretary of state, as president, and in retirement Jefferson nurtured these high-minded aspirations in a variety of ways. He thought that by examining the Capitol, for instance, Americans could acquaint themselves with correct examples of Roman and Greek architecture, and apply the lessons at home. Thus, the Capitol would help spread classical architecture across America. During his retirement, Jefferson approached the design of the University of Virginia with the same regard for its potential for architectural education. (1971 photograph.)

given him experience in hydraulics. Jefferson thought the dry dock would save the expense of maintaining a large fleet by having ready fewer but better maintained ships. A huge structure 175 feet wide and 800 feet long would be built with a roof modeled on that of the Paris grain market, the Halle au Bled. Ships raised and lowered in the dry dock would use technologies similar to those employed by Latrobe at the waterworks.[6]

Congress never funded the dry dock, but Jefferson was doubtless struck by Latrobe's beautiful drawings for it and the project afforded him ample opportunity to observe architectural talents that were complemented by a keen and sympathetic mind. Writing from Philadelphia, Latrobe replied to the president's offer, saying that the recent failure of his business partners made it impossible for him to give an answer immediately. He would, however, come to Washington soon and give his reply in person. He left little doubt what the answer would be when he concluded: "My sincere wish is to be employed near you, and under your direction."[7]

Jefferson's decision to hire Latrobe to build the south wing was the beginning of one of the most fascinating collaborations in the history of American architecture. It was, however, a blow to George Hadfield, who wanted to be restored to his former position at the Capitol. Hadfield's hopes were raised after Jefferson's election brought to the presidency a man who had over a decade previously enjoyed an intimate friendship with his sister, Maria Cosway. Within weeks of his inaugural, Jefferson received a letter from Hadfield pleading "the case of an artist." Hadfield recounted his suffering at the hands of the old board of commissioners, and his mortification at seeing his buildings credited to the board when its members were responsible for his ruin. He wanted the president to know that he would endeavor to make himself useful, and "obtain a substance in a country which I have chosen to spend the remainder of my life in."[8] Commissions for a barracks, an arsenal, and a jail were awarded to Hadfield during Jefferson's term, but the prized commission for the Capitol's south wing was given to Latrobe.

Portrait of B. Henry Latrobe
by Charles Willson Peale, ca. 1804
The White House Collection

Born near Leeds, England, Latrobe (1764–1820) studied engineering under John Smeaton and architecture under Samuel Pepys Cockerell. During Latrobe's early career he designed a few large houses and was offered other work, but future prospects in Great Britain were hampered by an economy stagnated by the Napoleonic Wars. After the death of his first wife, Latrobe set sail for America in 1795. A few years in Virginia were followed by a move to Philadelphia, where he designed the Bank of Pennsylvania, the country's first neoclassical building displaying a Grecian order and one of his best works. He later provided the city with its first municipal water system.

At the invitation of President Jefferson, Latrobe became the fourth architect to test his skill at the Capitol and was the first to develop a comprehensive vision of the building's architectural potential. Though he disliked the exterior, he found plenty of opportunities to improve on it. He devised a new interior plan that was spectacularly inventive, overcoming numerous obstacles imposed by the existing work. During restoration work following the War of 1812, he created a series of neoclassical interiors that are among the finest in the history of American architecture. His designs for the House of Representatives (now Statuary Hall), the Senate, and the Supreme Court brought the antiquities of Athens to the Capitol and helped associate the young republic with that ancient cradle of democracy.

Three years after leaving the Capitol, Latrobe died of yellow fever in New Orleans and was buried there in an unmarked grave.

A SOLID FOUNDATION

On April 4, 1803, Latrobe made his first report on the conditions at the Capitol and the problems with the arrangement of the south wing. Like Hadfield's seven years before, Latrobe's first observation concerned the relationship of the building's plan to the exterior elevation, which produced a "radical and incurable fault." The problem was the location of the House and Senate chambers in the basement. A grand stair on the west would lead to the principal floor but would force legislators to immediately descend an interior stair to reach the main rooms. The portico on the east front seemed to require a grand flight of steps, but that too would lead only to a narrow passage to the galleries overlooking the two chambers. A "poverty of design" plagued the Senate, the House, and the rotunda, because each was formed on the same idea: a one-story arcade carrying a colonnade. One was semi-elliptical (the Senate), one was fully elliptical (the House), and one was circular (the grand vestibule or rotunda), but their different shapes could not compensate for the monotonous repetition of arches and columns. These problems worried Latrobe, but he had no solutions to offer quite yet.

Turning to the south wing's plan and accommodations, Latrobe said they were inadequate, expensive, inconvenient, unsafe, and unattractive. There was nothing about the interior arrangement that warranted approval. The plan did not provide any committee rooms, nor were there offices for the Speaker, the clerk, the engrossing clerks, or the doorkeeper. There were no fireproof storage rooms for records or "closets of convenience" (a common euphemism for privies). The plan did not provide adequate lobbies or galleries. All of these facilities would be necessary for the smooth operation of business in the House of Representatives. External walls of the south wing were sixty-five feet high and could not be supported from within due to the absence of interior partitions. The dome over the chamber would exert dangerous pressure on these high, thin walls, and Latrobe said that he did not have the courage to build it. He admitted that the chamber's thirty-two columns would be visually striking, but he questioned the effect of arranging the colonnade on an elliptical plan. After working on a schematic design for an elliptical ceiling he found it impossible to devise suitable decorations. He estimated the cost of the columns and the entablature, all made of sandstone, at $62,000. The entablature would be disproportionately expensive because half of all the stones had to be cut on different radii. If the entablature were circular, by comparison, all stones would be cut on the same radius. So much money would be spent on the columns and the elliptical entablature that the rest of the wing would have to be built with inferior materials and would not be as permanent or magnificent.

Occupying fifty-six handwritten pages, Latrobe's first report was a devastating evaluation of the Capitol's plan, particularly as it concerned the south wing and the elliptical colonnade. (It is clear that the architect was unaware of Jefferson's significant role in the design of the House chamber developed during the conference of July 1793.) Latrobe proposed an alteration to the plan that would save money and better provide for the business and comfort of the House. To illustrate the alternative scheme, Latrobe presented a ground plan (now lost) of the new arrangement. The design was in the form of a half-domed semicircle without columns. Windows in the south wall and a large lantern in the center of the ceiling would provide the room with light and air. Three hundred sixty members could be accommodated, a number somewhat larger than provided in the elliptical plan. The configuration of the room was "that of the ancient theater (exedra), a form which the experience of ancient and modern times has established as the best for the purpose of speaking, seeing, and hearing." A lobby eighty feet long behind the Speaker's chair could also be used as a retiring room for members. Access to the galleries was provided by separate lobbies and stairs that kept the public from interfering with members. Committee rooms, offices, storage space, and privies were provided around the perimeter of the hall or in the "recess," Latrobe's term for the hyphen connecting the wing to the center building.

Latrobe's report concluded with an evaluation of the structural problems plaguing the north wing. He discovered that no provisions had been made to ventilate the foundations and warned that unless openings were made the wooden timbers, flooring, and joists would be consumed with dry rot. The roof and its shingle covering were sound, but leaks could be traced to bad gutters. He condemned the

quality of the lead lining the gutters and found their defects difficult to pinpoint due to the tar and sand coating. Some gutters discharged into a rooftop cistern that was not provided with a drain. Latrobe could find no purpose for the cistern and recommended its removal. He also suggested placing new down spouts discretely on the outside walls to replace those built into the walls. The four skylights leaked badly and should be protected by lanterns with vertical sashes and closed tops. In Latrobe's opinion, the skylights were a disgrace to the men who built them. He generally disliked skylights, calling them "great evils," because "in summer they heat the house, and in winter they become darkened and often broken by the snow."[9]

While Jefferson studied the report, Latrobe appointed John Lenthall clerk of the works. This appointment, dated April 7, 1803, was necessary because Latrobe anticipated long absences from the city overseeing work on the Chesapeake and Delaware Canal. He needed a trustworthy deputy to take charge of the day-to-day operations at the Capitol, and in Lenthall he found a perfect partner. With approvals from both Jefferson and Munroe, Latrobe empowered his clerk of the works with control over all workmen, to hire and fire them without appeal. Contractors' performance would be evaluated by Lenthall, who would bring any problems to the attention of the superintendent. There were already contracts for freestone from Aquia, local building stone, and scaffold poles. A mason named Timothy Caldwell had been hired to tear out the foundations left over from the 1790s. Contracts for sand, lime, lumber, and hauling were still needed. Lenthall was to supervise the foremen of laborers and masons and to serve as the head carpenter. Work paid by measurement was measured by Lenthall. Accounts paid by Munroe were authorized by his signature. In short, Lenthall was invested with all powers necessary to make him absolute master of the works.

Construction of the south wing began with the demolition of the old foundations. Latrobe discovered that stones had been loosely thrown in the foundation trench without mortar and without being made to bear upon each other. He determined that they would have to be removed down to the "first offset," which he was told was well built.[10] The existing footings were five feet eight inches thick and would be increased four more feet to measure a total of nine feet eight inches. While the final plan had not been settled, Latrobe's penchant for vaulted construction required massive foundations to bear the loads that would be imposed on them.

Just two weeks after his appointment, Lenthall was summoned by Jefferson to discuss the pace at which demolition was proceeding. The president thought that the work did not have sufficient "spirit," but he was assured that all the old stonework would be removed in two days and the new foundations would begin soon. Twenty-three weeks remained in the building season and Jefferson suggested dividing the stonework into twenty-three portions to ensure that it did not fall behind schedule.[11] The outside walls would rise, fencing in the "oven," while the president considered whether to retain the original plan or to approve Latrobe's revisions.

Writing from Philadelphia, Latrobe instructed Lenthall on May 5, 1803, to "pull up or knock down" the stonework in order to build "*my* plan." The bad stonework in Thornton's plan was "new proof of the *stupid genius* of its Author."[12] This characterization of Thornton was the first of many times the architect denounced the doctor, whom he considered nothing more than a charlatan. Latrobe tended to blame Thornton for all the faulty construction he encountered at the Capitol in addition to the countless faults he found in its design. For his part, Thornton tended to take credit for all aspects of the Capitol design, even Hallet's plans for the wings. Both strong-willed and self-assured, Latrobe and Thornton embarked upon a collision course that eventually landed them in court and would ultimately reflect little credit upon either man.

A discrepancy that Lenthall noted in the elevations of the north wing added to Latrobe's already low opinion of Dr. Thornton. The west elevation was sixteen inches shorter in length than the east. For the sake of appearance and consistency, Lenthall wanted to know if it was best to repeat the mistake in the south wing. Latrobe determined that unless his east and west walls matched precisely, the internal vaulting would be thrown off. It would be better to suffer a small evil on the outside in order to have the advantage of working symmetrically on the interior. And since the central conference room (a feature not yet discarded) would project beyond the western walls of the two

wings, the fact that they did not exactly match would hardly be noticeable.[13]

Just when Jefferson and Latrobe decided to do away with the conference room is not precisely known. Both surely recognized the architectural problems that room created, chiefly how to cover it with a roof that did not conflict with the dome over the rotunda. Design issues aside, the president had no use for the conference room because of his republican views and his aversion to speaking publicly. Unlike his two predecessors, Jefferson chose not to deliver his annual message before joint sessions of Congress. Instead, his secretary carried the message to the Capitol where a clerk read it to representatives and senators. This saved Jefferson the necessity of making a speech and avoided the annoying spectacle of legislators coming to the President's House en masse to make their reply. Endless speeches, courtly bows, tedious protocol, and pointless ceremony were all things the third president found objectionable in the previous Federalist administrations, and he intended to eschew them as far as possible in his. The trappings of monarchy had no place in a democracy, where all citizens were supposed to be equal. As his biographer Dumas Malone pointed out, Jefferson may have promoted classical public buildings as "civic temples," but he wanted no part in "glorification of rulers."[14] Because the conference room in the Capitol was intended as a stage for presidential pomp and pageantry, it would crumble to dust before Jefferson would appear there. His notions of republican decorum were better served by simply staying home. (Jefferson's policy continued until 1913, when Woodrow Wilson went to the Capitol to deliver his annual message in person.)

In the fall of 1803, the wife of Congressman Samuel L. Mitchill heard that the Senate adjourned for three days so its members could attend the horse races that were such a popular pastime in early Washington. Without an apology her husband replied: "The Senate actually did adjourn for three days, not on account of the races . . . but merely to admit a mason to plaster the ceiling of their chamber, which had fallen down a few days before." Mitchill then confessed that he and a number of ladies and clergymen were at an "exhibition of the speed of horses," but claimed the recreation was needed because members had worked so diligently on the "Louisiana business."[15] Latrobe asked Lenthall about the ceiling's tumble and wanted to know the cause of the accident.[16] Luckily, the room was empty at the time the ceiling fell and no injuries were reported. It was, however, yet another indication of the shoddy workmanship plaguing the north wing.

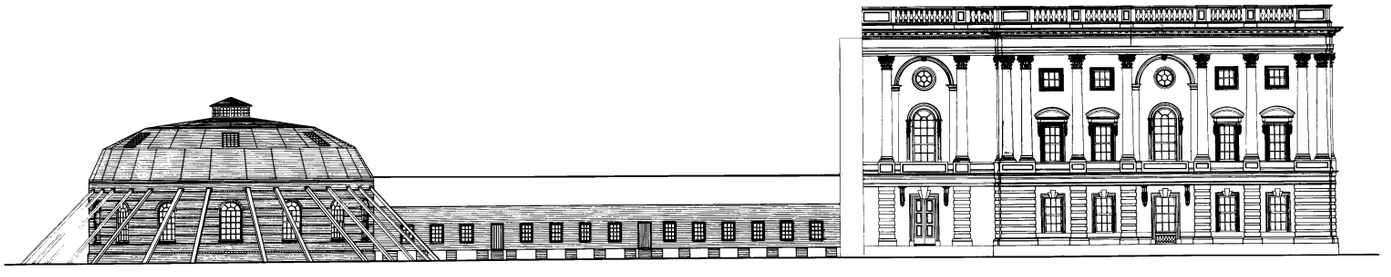
RETHINKING THE SOUTH WING

Latrobe reviewed his first year's accomplishments in a report to Congress on February 20, 1804. He had been in Philadelphia or Delaware during much of the previous summer and fall but did not believe his absence from Washington affected the work there. The building season had not produced dramatic results and he blamed the slow progress on wet weather, which flooded the freestone quarry, and the lack of workmen, who were not easily reassembled for the resumption of the Capitol's construction. Work ceased when Congress convened in mid-October, cutting short the building season by six weeks. The perimeter walls of the south wing reached only half the height of the

The Capitol As It Appeared in 1803

Conjectural Reconstruction, 1989

During Jefferson's first term, the Capitol was a peculiar patchwork of unfinished pieces. The north wing was joined to an elliptical hall (nicknamed the "oven") by a low wooden gangway. The little brick structure was a temporary accommodation for the House of Representatives that was so hastily and badly built that Latrobe propped its walls with strong wooden braces.



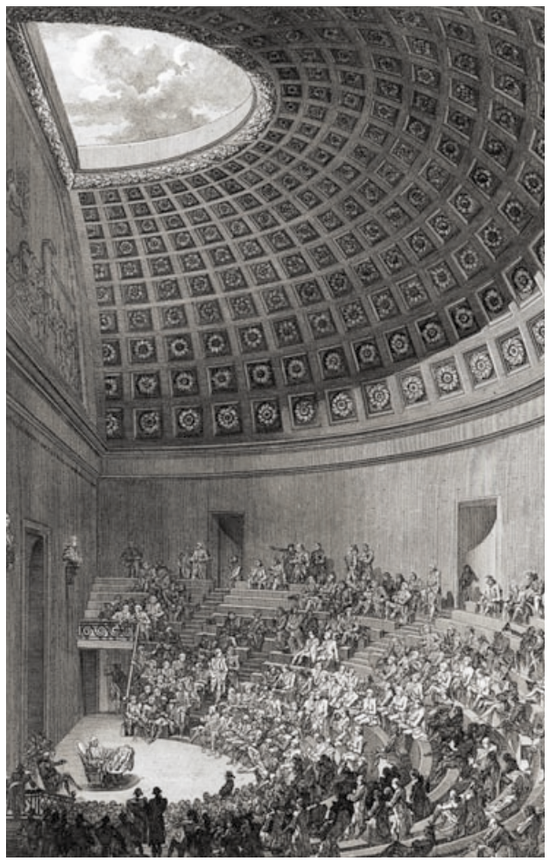
A Section of the House of Commons Dublin

by Rowland Omer,
Engraving by Peter Mazell, 1767

The first building designed specifically to accommodate a bicameral legislature was the Parliament House in Dublin (1728–1739) by Sir Edward Lovet Pearce. The House of Commons consisted of a one-story arcade supporting two-story columns supporting, in turn, an entablature and a domed ceiling. This arrangement was cited as the prototype for the House chamber depicted in the "conference plan" of 1793. Jefferson envisioned the ceiling with tapering skylights like the ones he admired at the Paris grain market.

ground floor, yet were high enough to block some of the light to the "oven." Lenthall added a roof lantern to help compensate for the loss. He also relaid the floor to accommodate the 142 members of the Eighth Congress. Stout braces were installed to shore up the walls, which threatened to collapse under the weight of the roof. In all, $555 was spent to repair the temporary House chamber. For the Senate, a stove was added under the floor to help heat the room, the cellars were plastered to control dampness, and vents were cut through the foundations to expel trapped moisture that threatened to destroy the wooden joists and flooring. The roof and skylights were also repaired.[17]

Soon after the House of Representatives received Latrobe's first annual report, it responded with questions about plans for its future accommodation in the south wing. A committee asked Latrobe to describe the original plan of the Capitol, specifically the part that was intended for the House, and to give his opinion regarding opportunities for improvement. Latrobe replied with a description of the original plan for the south wing as a three-story room, about 108 by 84 feet with an elliptical arcade supporting columns that in turn helped support the



***Ecole de Chirurgie* [School of Surgery]**

Engraving by Claude-Rene-Gabriel Poulleau

In Jacques Gondoin's *Description des ecoles de chirurgie:* Paris, 1780

Boston Athenaeum

In Latrobe's opinion, the best form for a legislative chamber was semicircular in plan covered by a half-domed ceiling. One of the precedents cited was the surgical theater in Paris, considered an excellent room for speaking, hearing, and seeing. It was also an appealing classical form that recalled the architecture of ancient Rome and Greece.

roof. To visualize the design, he told his readers to imagine the Senate chamber doubled and formed into a complete ellipse. The description was followed by a list of eleven objections, including the absence of committee rooms or offices, and the need for such things as privies and fireproof repositories for records. All of these objections had been expressed to the president, but now Congress learned of them as well. Major improvements to the plan, which the president was then considering, involved raising the hall of the House to the second, or principal, floor and devoting the first floor entirely to offices and committee rooms. The change would not alter the exterior appearance of the wing.[18] The idea of moving the hall of the House to the second floor occurred to Latrobe after the president rejected his semicircular plan as too great a departure from the original elliptical configuration.

President Jefferson had the authority to approve the changes that Latrobe proposed, but he did not want to exercise that authority without Dr. Thornton's concurrence. To smooth the way, Latrobe arranged a meeting with Thornton to explain his proposals. It was not a pleasant encounter. Using a defense first employed against Hallet, Thornton dismissed Latrobe's objections to the plan by saying that any and all difficulties could be overcome unless those in charge "were too ignorant to remove them." He abruptly refused to discuss the subject further except to say that he considered Latrobe unfit to execute the plan. His manner, tone of voice, and expressions were highly offensive to Latrobe, who had not expected to be treated so rudely. Latrobe left with a determination to resign but thought better of it by the time he wrote Jefferson an account of the meeting.[19] The president regretted that it had been a failure. He was still ambivalent about the proposed changes to the plan and observed (from firsthand experience) that "Nothing impedes progress so much as perpetual changes of design." He also thought the chamber devised in the "conference plan" would be "more handsome and commodious than any thing which can now be proposed for the same area." The Halle au Bled dome would doubtless make it the finest room in America. And while its structural problem presented "difficulties to the Executor," the president said that "it is to overcome difficulties that we employ men of genius."[20]

Jefferson's letter was meant to coax the architect into giving up his quest for changing the plan of the south wing. Latrobe's mind, however, was made up. His job now was to demonstrate how a domed chamber could be accommodated in a two-story space built atop a floor devoted to offices and committee rooms. On February 28, 1804, Latrobe promised Jefferson that he would soon send drawings of the south wing and pleaded for the office story: "If the house be raised to the level of the top of the basement story, I will withdraw all further opposition to the colonnade and its elliptical form."[21] He began working on the drawings soon after returning to Delaware. Latrobe bemoaned his latest challenge in a letter to Lenthall:

> I am laboring at the plan, retaining the elliptical colonnade. My conscience urges me exceedingly to throw the trumpery, along with my appointment into the fire. When once erected, the absurdity can never be recalled and a public explanation can only amount to this, that *one* president was block headed enough to *adopt* a plan, which *another* was fool enough to *retain,* when he might have altered it. The only discovery which I have made in *elaborating* the thing . . . is that the Doctor was born under a musical planet, for all his rooms fall naturally into the shape of fiddles, tambourines, and Mandolins, one or two into that of a Harp.[22]

It is evident Latrobe was unaware that Dr. Thornton did not draw the plan of the wings that included so many rooms shaped like musical instruments. Most of the credit (or blame) for that belonged to Stephen Hallet. Latrobe also thought the domed rotunda was George Hadfield's idea, when in fact it was the one part of the plan that Thornton could rightly claim as his own.[23] Such was the confused state of attribution, even at that early date.

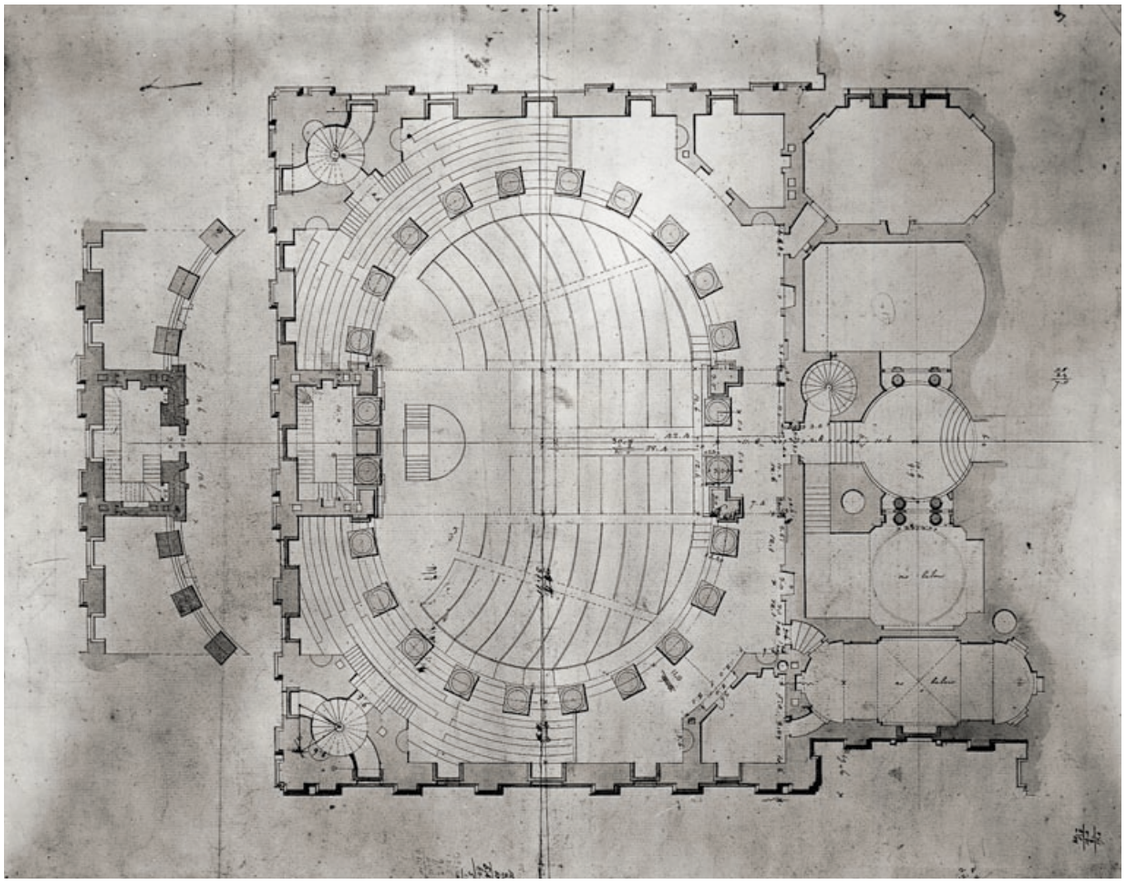
On March 16, 1804, the House of Representatives passed an appropriation of $50,000 to continue work on the south wing. The appropriation was sent to the Senate, where dissatisfied members sought to kill or amend it. Robert Wright of Maryland proposed removing the capital to Baltimore as a means to scare local citizens into making more comfortable accommodations available to legislators. After a day of debate, Wright's bill was defeated. Soon, another proposal was offered by Joseph Anderson of Tennessee. He wanted the President's House transformed into the Capitol and a house rented for the president. The Senate

agreed, but the House refused and the appropriation languished in congressional deadlock.[24]

When Latrobe learned of the proposal, he blamed the "Blockheads" in the Senate.[25] On the last day of the session, Anderson reported that the conference could not agree on his recommendation and advised deferring it until the next session. Faced with causing work to stop, the Senate disagreed with Anderson's report and dropped its objections to the appropriation. It was approved on March 27, 1804. Construction would continue on the Capitol and Jefferson could stay in the President's House.[26]

Two days after the appropriation was signed, Latrobe sent Jefferson a roll of drawings for the south wing illustrating his latest idea for the House chamber. The most important drawing showed the elliptical colonnade converted into "two semicircles abutting upon a parallelogram." The slight alteration offered several distinct advantages: it would be less expensive; it could better accommodate chimney flues rising from below; and it could give the location of the Speaker's chair a "decision of character." Yet, the curving colonnades preserved *"the principal,* and the great feature of the original design." In the first story, Latrobe provided six committee rooms and a large room for clerks. The spaces deep within the wing, without access to natural light and ventilation, were devoted to fireproof record storage vaults, privies, and furnace rooms. The principal way to the chamber would be through a series of domed vestibules, vaulted lobbies, and a staircase closely confined by thick masonry walls. Proceeding along this path, encountering a variety of spacial experiences, lighting conditions, and "scenery," would be one of the special architectural treats offered by Latrobe's new plan.

Along with the plans, Latrobe sent two sections of the wing, both of which showed the House



Plan of the Second, or Principal Story of the South Wing

by B. Henry Latrobe 1804

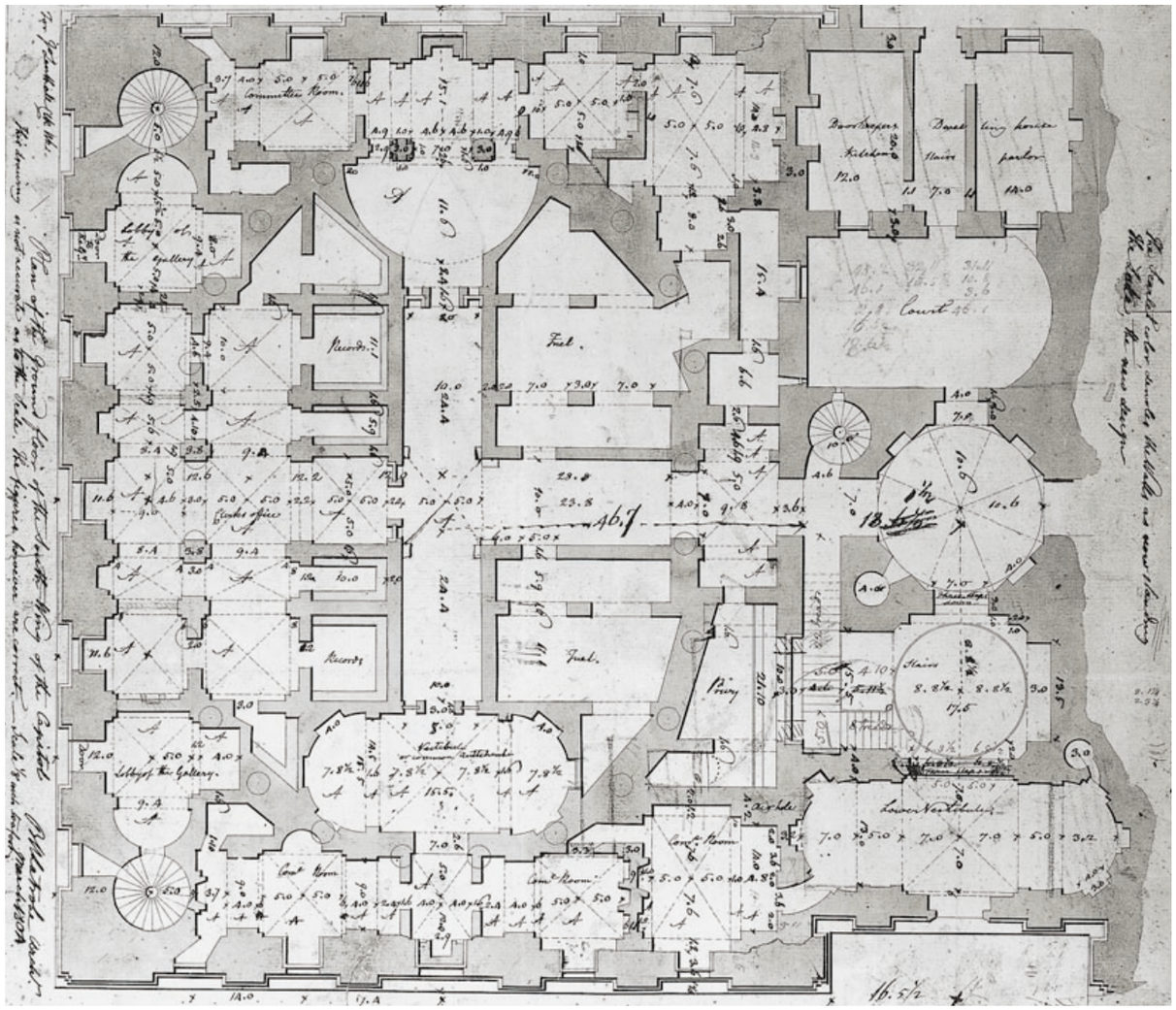
Library of Congress

In place of an elliptical chamber, Latrobe designed two semicircular colonnades connected by a "parallelogram." In the area between the wing and the rotunda he planned a committee room, a parlor, a courtyard, and a circular vestibule ornamented with stone columns.

Plan of the Ground Story of the South Wing of the Capitol

by B. Henry Latrobe 1804

Library of Congress



Latrobe's plan provided six committee rooms, a large office for the clerk, indoor privies, and other useful facilities not found in earlier plans. Committee rooms were placed along the east (bottom) and west (top) walls with windows that provided light and air. The middle parts were occupied by furnace rooms, record vaults, and passageways. Structural considerations imposed by the chamber above resulted in an unusually complex arrangement.

Despite British incendiaries and minor remodeling, most of the office story survives today, containing some of the Capitol's oldest interior features.

chamber in its newly proposed configuration. One drawing illustrated the ceiling held by columns based on the ancient Tower of the Winds in Athens. He suggested that the capitals be made of cast iron with the lower range of leaves attached to the bell by rivets or screws. (Such an idea was prophetic, but metal column capitals would not appear at the Capitol until 1828.) A second section showed the chamber in the Doric order, which the president apparently preferred, accompanied by a long explanation regarding the difficulties with its entablature. It was impossible to regulate the metopes and triglyphs without violating the rules governing their disposition. The Tower of the Winds order was easier to work with, and would produce a richer effect in any case. Latrobe placed the drawings into the president's hands asking him to acknowledge his hard work even if he did not approve the results.[27] Working in his temporary quarters in New Castle, Delaware, Latrobe took just three weeks to conceive the new design for the House chamber, arrange an office story, and consider which order to use. Communicating these ideas through beautifully rendered drawings made Latrobe's efforts all the more remarkable.

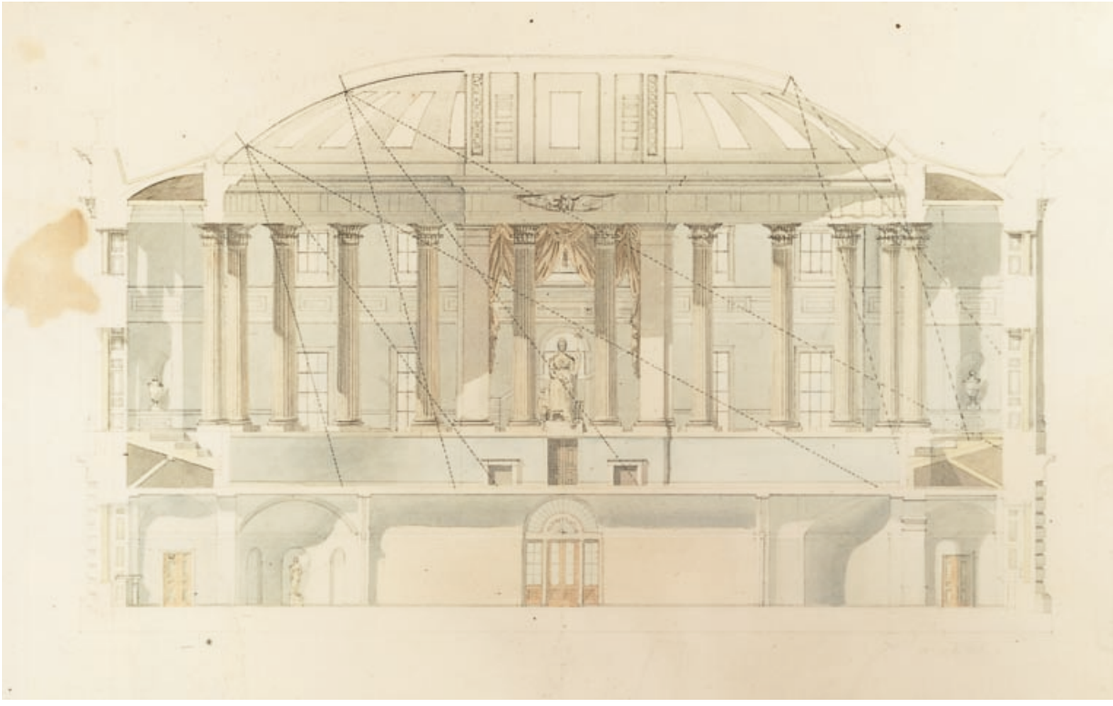
Jefferson received the drawings at Monticello on April 6, 1804, and wrote Latrobe three days later with his general approval. Moving the chamber to the second floor was finally accepted, but he wanted more time to think about the shape of its colonnade. The plans for the recess were also approved, but its construction was postponed

Section of the South Wing, Looking South

by B. Henry Latrobe, 1804

Library of Congress

Shown in the center of the drawing is a seated figure of Liberty later modeled by Giuseppe Franzoni. The statue presided over the Speaker's rostrum (not shown) and, along with the drapery and carved eagle, helped give the chamber a strong focal point.

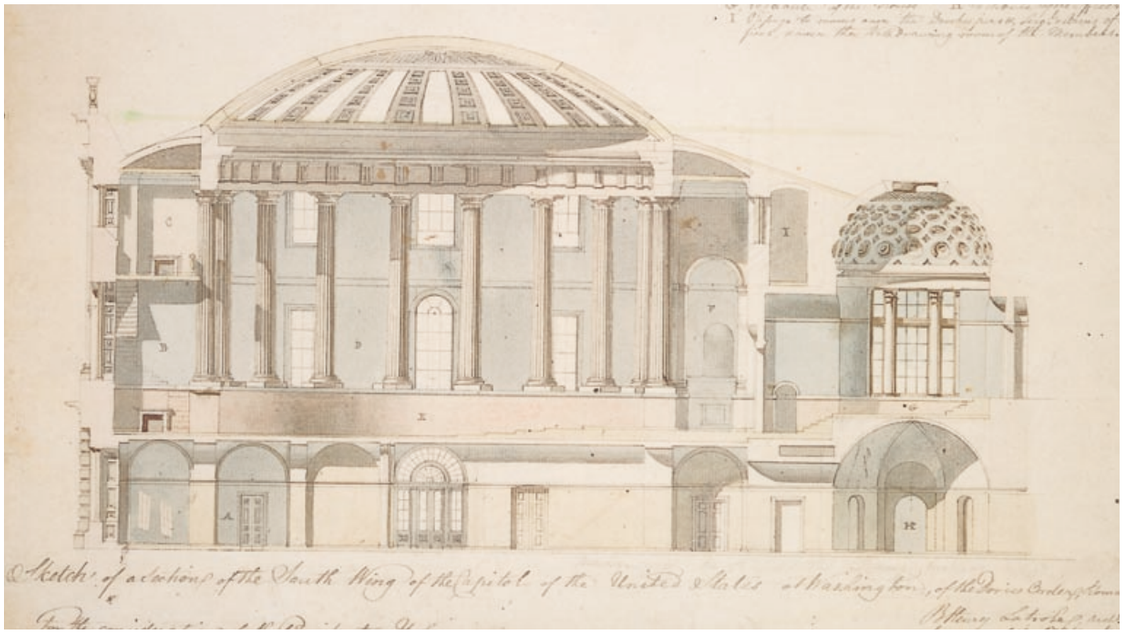


Sketch of a Section of the South Wing of the Capitol of the United States at Washington, of the Doric Order, Roman style

by B. Henry Latrobe

1804

Library of Congress



To demonstrate that the Doric order would not work for the House chamber, Latrobe drew this section showing the distribution of metopes and triglyphs belonging to the entablature. He could not make the metopes square, as dictated by the rules of classical architecture, and felt therefore that the Doric order was unworkable. President Jefferson, also a stickler for architectural rules, subsequently abandoned Doric in favor of Corinthian.

because the appropriation covered the south wing only. On the matter of what order to use in the chamber, Jefferson acknowledged the problem with the Doric entablature and concluded that "we must make this [room] Corinthian, and do the best we can for the capitals and modillions." The drawings were returned to Latrobe with the president's appeal to push mightily and finish the outside by summer.[28]

TROUBLE WITH THORNTON

Soon after Jefferson approved the revised plan of the south wing, the "oven" was demolished. Pulling down the unsightly and unsound building was a victory for Latrobe and his aspirations for a House chamber that would be a credit to himself, the president, and the country. Dr. Thornton, however, saw matters quite differently. The Capitol's original design had been sanctified by George Washington's blessing and was being altered for no reason. Thornton did not appreciate the improvements made to the interior architecture or the practical accommodations provided in the revised plan. Nor could he remain silent when criticism was heaped upon the Capitol's plan, which was one of Latrobe's special talents. Latrobe's report to Congress containing the scathing (and entirely justified) critique of the original plan was too much for Thornton to take. On April 23 he responded by declaring Latrobe's report insulting, uncivil, ungentlemanly, and false.[29]

On April 28, Latrobe poured out his scorn and anger in a letter to Thornton. He reminded the doctor of his rude, insulting behavior when they discussed alterations to the plan of the south wing, a pattern of conduct that was repeated whenever they met. Despite "the confusion of your conversation, and the rubbish of your language" Latrobe tried to keep Thornton informed about his thoughts regarding the Capitol but was continually rebuffed. "Those who despise you most in Washington," Latrobe wrote, "can bear witness to my perseverance in this resolution." In one of its calmer passages, he said:

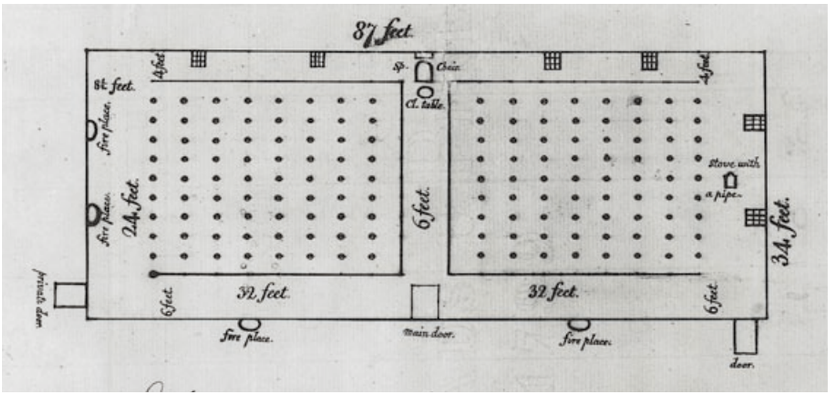
> Open hostility is safer, than insidious friendship. I cannot therefore regret the declaration of War contained in your letter . . . I now stand on the Ground from which you drove Hallet, and Hadfield to ruin. You may prove victorious against me also; but the contest will not be without spectators.[30]

Each man continued to pelt the other with insults for nine years until a court of law put the matter to rest. Confident in his professional skills and prerogatives, Latrobe was matched against a master of slander whose attacks occasionally took the form of sarcastic little poems that were circulated around Washington. One such rhyme involved the grave of a woman of ill repute named Moll Turner, whom Thornton imagined had been led to ruin by Latrobe:

> The monument of poor Moll Turner!
> Whose clay so soak'd that Hell can't burn her.
> How died poor Moll?—Moll died of spleen,
> Because she found Latrobe too keen:
> In other words, he broke Moll's heart,
> He so out play'd the blackguard part!
> What! Out-matched Moll?—yes, rough or civil,
> He can out-jaw—out-lie the Devil.
> Hell dries the clay of poor Moll Turner,
> And waits Latrobe as fuel to burn her![31]

As if Thornton were not making life miserable enough, Latrobe's relationship with the president faltered during this period. The architect convinced Jefferson that the "oven" had to be removed before work resumed on the south wing in the spring of 1804. Jefferson was hesitant to approve demolition, thinking the House of Representatives could meet in the little building for one more session. But the arguments in favor of its removal were strong and the president relented. The House would be returned to the library in the north wing for its next session. Jefferson spent the summer away from Washington and upon his return in the last week of September he found no progress at all on the interior walls, which were supposed to have been built simultaneously with the outside walls. That was the premise upon which he had permitted the "oven" to be demolished. According to Lenthall, who took the brunt of the president's displeasure in Latrobe's absence, the problem was sickness among the workmen. Jefferson dismissed the excuse, saying that replacements should have been employed.

The real problem was the result of a misunderstanding of the president's wishes. Lenthall thought Jefferson wanted work concentrated on



Seating Plan of the House of Representatives in the Library of Congress, 1804

Library of Congress

Following demolition of the "oven" in the spring of 1804, the House of Representatives was again obliged to hold its sessions in the north wing. This plan (with west at the top) shows the Library of Congress arranged to accommodate 142 members of the House.

the outside walls, which were then up to the attic window sills. With little time remaining in the building season, Jefferson ordered all efforts redirected at the cellar walls so there would be something new to show where the old building had once stood. Overall, more effort would be needed to finish the south wing, which was falling behind schedule: "Nothing but the greatest exertion can render possible the completion of the work the next year, and the cramming of the Representatives into the library a second and long session," Jefferson wrote.[32]

Jefferson ordered Latrobe to return to Washington as soon as possible. He arrived on October 11 and immediately wrote the president an apologetic letter to explain his long absence. His wife's mother had died suddenly. Commitments had detained him in New Castle. When traveling with his son to Baltimore, where the lad was enrolled in a "French Academy," sickness detained them en route. Such were the circumstances surrounding Latrobe's summer away from the Capitol. Having sent letters and drawings to Lenthall, he did not believe that he had neglected his duty, but he suspected that his absence had cost him the president's confidence.[33] Despite the apologies and explanations, Latrobe's part-time approach to his Washington work was beginning to cause problems.

The second session of the Eighth Congress convened on November 5, 1804. A week later Jefferson instructed Latrobe to write a report on the progress made at the Capitol, giving an estimate of the probable cost of finishing the south wing. He detected opposition in Congress to further appropriations due to the slow pace of construction. After the report was submitted, Latrobe was expected to brief key members to give them the information necessary to secure the appropriation.[34] Writing from Wilmington, where he was attending a meeting of the Chesapeake and Delaware Canal Company, Latrobe promised to have the report ready upon his return to Washington.[35]

Latrobe's report was finished on December 1 and, after some judicious editing by Jefferson, transmitted to Congress five days later. After discussing the repairs made to the roof of the President's House, Latrobe turned to the Capitol, beginning that section with a long explanation of the reasons why more progress had not been made during the past building season. "The first and principal of these," he wrote, "have been the time, labor, and expense of pulling down to the very foundation all that had been formerly erected." Sickness and rain were retarding factors as well. While he acknowledged it would have been best to carry up the inside walls along with the outside ones, he explained that building the outside walls kept the stone cutters from being idle. (This excuse may have been valid, but was not what the president wanted.) He reported that the southern half of the cellar was finished, and while it might not appear significant, the work there had been considerable.[36]

Latrobe's report did not contain an estimate for completing the south wing, but it asked for an appropriation exceeding the usual annual stipend of $50,000. In a letter to the chairman of the committee to which the report was referred, Congressman Philip R. Thompson of Virginia, Latrobe stated that $109,100 would be needed to finish the wing and $25,200 to build the recess. He reasoned that

one appropriation of $100,000 would guarantee that the House would occupy its new chamber in December 1805.[37] Latrobe would soon regret making a promise that he could not keep, but it helped secure the appropriation because no representative wanted to be crammed into the library any longer than necessary. On January 25, 1805, Jefferson approved $110,000 for the south wing and another $20,000 to repair the north wing and other public buildings.[38]

ITALIAN SCULPTORS

Encouraged by the generous appropriation, Jefferson and Latrobe now acted upon the idea of using allegorical as well as architectural sculpture in the House chamber. Skilled modelers and carvers were needed to carry out the scheme. It would be necessary to look to Europe for artists who might be enticed to Washington by the promise of steady and reasonably well paid employment. Two days after Jefferson's second inaugural, Latrobe wrote Philip Mazzei asking for "assistance in procuring for us the aid of a good Sculptor in the erection of public buildings in this city, especially the Capitol." Mazzei was an old Italian friend of the president who had come to Virginia in 1773 and settled near Monticello. Mazzei was interested in growing Italian olives and grapes in America, and became friends with his famous neighbor. He returned home in 1785 but saw Jefferson occasionally in Paris. Now, twenty years later, Mazzei was the person Jefferson thought best able to recruit sculptors for the Capitol.

Latrobe described the kind of work that would be expected from the persons engaged in the sculptural program. First, he needed someone to carve twenty-four Corinthian capitals, two feet, four inches in diameter and an "enriched" entablature 147 feet long. Next was a colossal eagle for the frieze with wings extending twelve feet, six inches. Wages offered the best carvers ranged from $2.50 to $3.00 a day, while assistants could expect $1.50 to $2.00. Although only skilled sculptors would do, he also wanted men who would feel comfortable in Washington:

> There are however other qualities which seems so essential, as to be almost as necessary as talents, I mean, good *temper* and good morals. Without them an artist would find himself most unpleasantly situated in a country the language and customs of which are so different from his own, and we could have no dependance on a person discontented with his situation. For though every exertion would be made on my part to make his engagement perfectly agreeable to him the *irritability* of good artists is well known and is often not easily quieted.[39]

The American consul in Leghorn would arrange passage for the sculptors, who should be prepared to sign a two-year contract. Single men were preferred, but if married men were selected they were welcome to bring their families to America. Upon conclusion of the work return passage would be provided by the American government.

Before closing his letter Latrobe asked Mazzei if he could find out how much Antonio Canova would charge for a seated figure of Liberty nine feet high. If the marble were too heavy for a transatlantic voyage, perhaps Canova would model a plaster statue that could be more easily shipped. It could later be carved in American marble. If Canova refused the commission because of his age, could he recommend another first-rate sculptor?

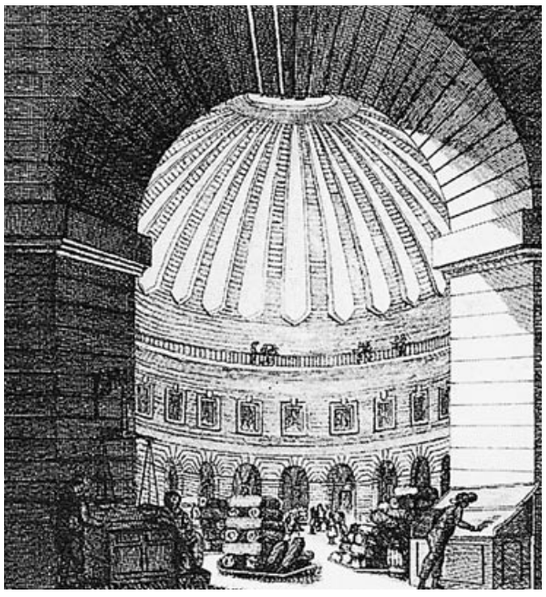
Jefferson had not always approved the notion of stone columns with stone capitals for the House chamber. Just a year earlier he asked Latrobe if it would be possible to make the interior columns of brick with a coating of plaster. He cited Palladio as one authority who approved of this practice and indicated that there were such columns in Virginia twenty feet tall that were executed by a "common bricklayer."[40] Such shortcuts were anathema to Latrobe, who strove to build with only the finest, most long-lasting materials available to him. While he won the fight for stone columns, his preference for capitals modeled after those at the Tower of the Winds was overruled. Jefferson preferred the Roman order of the Temple of Jupiter Stator (known today as the Temple of Castor), which came highly recommended by Palladio. Its sculptural complexity helped create the need to import skilled carvers.[41] A final decision on which order to use had not yet been made, and Latrobe still hoped that he could introduce a Grecian order in the House chamber.

UTILITY VERSUS BEAUTY

While Jefferson was satisfied with construction progress, he was disappointed to learn of Latrobe's concerns regarding the Halle au Bled dome over the chamber. Of all the things Latrobe could object to, the ceiling based on the Parisian grain market was the most dear to the president. It had made an indelible impression upon his mind while he was living in France, and from his earliest involvement in the Capitol he had hoped to recreate it over the House chamber. The long, tapering ribbons of glass set between the ribs of the dome would dazzle the room with light, surprising the visitor with unexpected brilliance. Latrobe wrote the president on August 31, 1805, with a list of reasons to abandon the scheme and drawings to illustrate his points. He showed how light would enter the hall during different times of the day and at different times of the year. Sunlight would be annoying during the winter and troublesome in summer. But the real problem was the difficulty of preventing leaks. Each of the twenty skylights was five feet wide, fifteen feet long, and made up of forty panes of glass. With a total of 800 panes and 2,400 joints, the skylights were guaranteed to leak. It would take just one leak dropping water on the head of a congressman to disrupt the whole House. Frost would make leaks unavoidable, while "careless servants" clearing snow off the roof would surely break the skylights. A hail storm would break the glass in a minute. Even if the skylights did not leak, condensation would drip from the cold glass. Other difficulties were mentioned, such as the price and quality of glass or the use of blinds to control sunlight, but keeping water off members' heads was Latrobe's primary concern.[42]

Jefferson was distressed to learn that Latrobe thought it impossible to build a watertight dome over the House chamber with the skylights that he so admired. Yet, despite a deep sense of regret, he was prepared to yield the point. He reiterated his contention that the Halle au Bled dome would have made the chamber the handsomest room in the world.[43] But, uncharacteristically, Jefferson left the decision to Latrobe. This put the architect in the unenviable position of choosing either to disappoint the president or to soak members of the House. He declined to make the choice, suggesting to the president that they review the topic in the near future.[44]

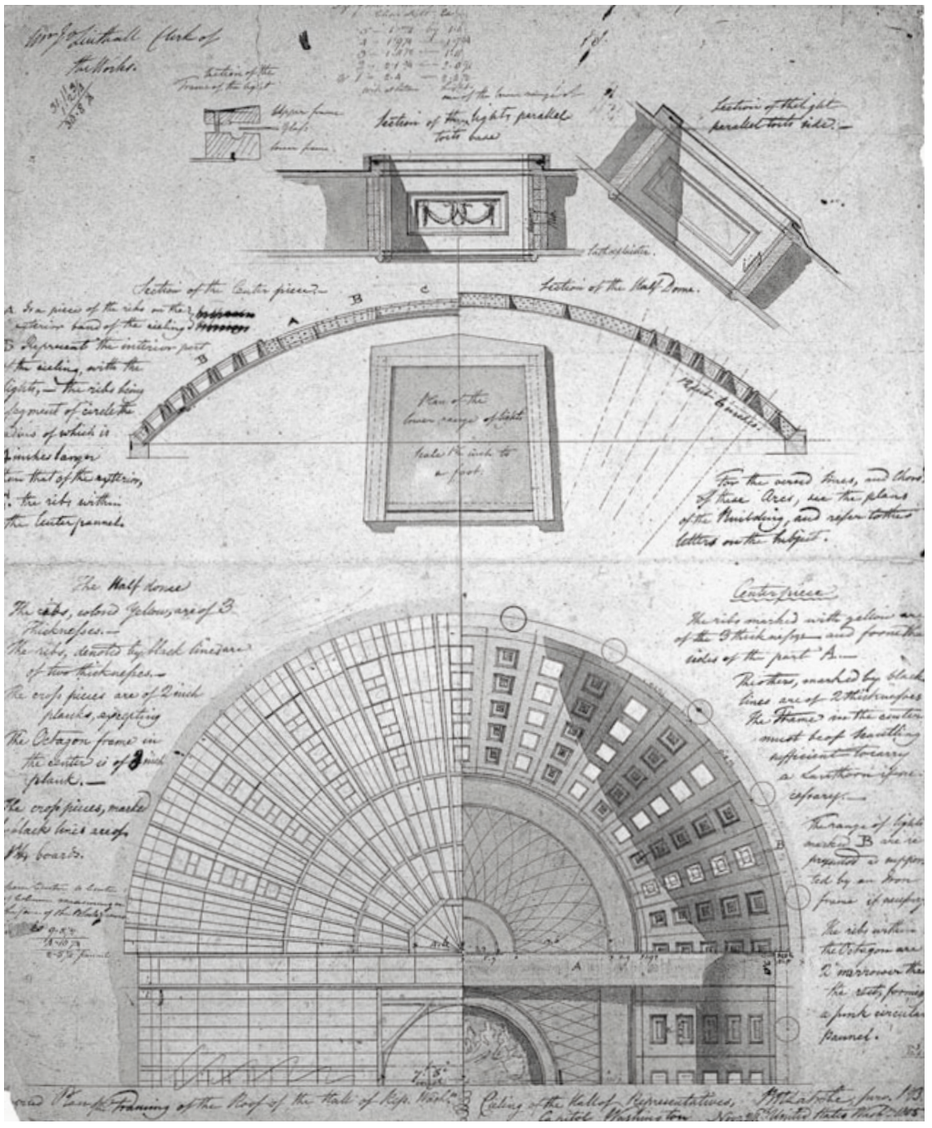
Latrobe spent most of the fall of 1805 in Delaware. While there, he searched his mind for a solution to the skylight problem and by mid-November had developed a variation of the Halle au Bled dome that he thought just might prove satisfactory. Instead of a continuous expanse of glass between the ribs, Latrobe proposed a range of five graduated skylights resembling coffers but with glass backs. Twenty ranges would be necessary bringing the total number of "panel lights," as he called them, to 100. Because each panel was small enough to be covered by a single sheet of glass, the problem with joints was virtually eliminated. Wire



Halle au Bled

In L. V. Tiéry's
***Guide des amateurs et des étrangers vouageurs à Paris* (1787)**

Jefferson was "violently smitten" by some of the newer buildings in Paris when he was American minister to France (1785–1789). He was particularly taken by the grain market and its wooden dome, finished just before he arrived in France. He regarded the Halle au Bled as "the most superb thing on Earth." Its dome and tapering skylights literally dazzled him. Jefferson proposed such a dome for the President's House (in his anonymous competition entry of 1792), the Capitol (over the House chamber), and the Washington Navy Yard (over the dry dock). A variation of the Halle au Bled dome for the Capitol's south wing was the only one built.



House Chamber Ceiling and Roof Details

by B. Henry Latrobe, 1805

Library of Congress

Latrobe struggled to reconcile Jefferson's desire to recreate the Halle au Bled dome over the House of Representatives with his own hopes for a watertight ceiling. In the fall of 1805, he hit upon the idea of using "panel lights," which promised to give much the same effect but could be made watertight. This sheet shows a reflected plan (bottom) of half of the ceiling with fifty individual "panel lights" along with waterproofing details.

screens could protect the glass from hail or careless servants. The new arrangement approximated the visual effect that the president wanted but avoided many of the problems. Latrobe sent Lenthall a detailed drawing of the proposed ceiling on November 25 but wanted to wait until he returned to Washington before telling Jefferson about the new plan.[45]

Just before the roof drawing was sent, Lenthall received detailed drawings for the wooden trim of the rooms in the office story. The paneled window jambs in the "squint eyed" committee rooms (modern day H–109 and H–153) were troublesome, and Latrobe encouraged his clerk to come up with better designs if he could. Due to the thick mass of masonry at the southeast and southwest corners of the wing, Latrobe was obliged to connect end windows with interior rooms via jambs that were splayed at a steep angle, earning the rooms their "squint eyed" nickname. The architect wanted to pave the corridors with marble and floor the offices and committee rooms with wood, but he feared that he might have to yield to Jefferson's preference for French tiles. Window shutters would not be made to match those in the north wing, which Latrobe considered "ill framed and ill paneled." Shutters with three equal flaps worked best, but, again, he left the details for Lenthall to decide.[46] Designs for the window sash, frames, doors, and trim were settled and the carpentry work could proceed while Lenthall tinkered with details.[47]

On December 22, 1805, Latrobe finished his third annual report. He began by blaming the "limited resources of this City" for disappointing his hope of seating the House in its new chamber. He explained that a number of large construction projects in Washington and Baltimore were competing for a limited supply of materials and workmen. Problems with the quarry also delayed the work. Yet, the cellars and the office story were finished, and most of the columns for the chamber were received although none had been installed. Of the $110,000 appropriation, a balance of $34,605 remained, and Latrobe wanted an additional $25,000 for the wing and $25,200 for the recess.[48] Annoyed by the architect's broken promise, a committee of the House instructed the president to have their new chamber ready next year without fail.[49] Congress then appropriated $40,000 for completing the south wing and the recess.[50]

FRANZONI AND ANDREI

While in Philadelphia, Latrobe learned that Giuseppe Franzoni and Giovanni Andrei, two sculptors recruited by Phillip Mazzei, had arrived in Washington at the end of February 1806. Mazzei turned out to be a diligent agent who was delighted to help his old friend Jefferson. He scoured the Italian countryside looking for sculptors to work in America, traveling to Rome and Florence before finding two excellent artists whom he thought would exceed all expectations. Mazzei described them as well tempered, not too old or too young, and "republicans at heart." They had good morals and even tempers, and they were more than capable of performing the work expected of them. Both Andrei and Franzoni could model and carve marble. On the matter of the figure of Liberty, Canova did not have the time to make it, but Mazzei mentioned it to Bertel Thorvaldsen, the great Danish sculptor who worked in Rome. (He later discovered that Thorvaldsen's fee was astronomical.) Franzoni could certainly make the statue of Liberty as well as anyone, but Mazzei thought that it should be carved in Rome, "where the mind of the Artist is sublimed . . . by the sight of so many and so grand Objects."[51]

Latrobe immediately set Franzoni to work on the enormous eagle for the frieze above the Speaker's rostrum. Having never seen an American eagle, he modeled the body and head from memory, producing a distinctively un-American –looking bird. To give Franzoni a better idea of the appearance and character of an American eagle, Latrobe wrote Charles Willson Peale in Philadelphia asking if he could send a drawing of the head and claws of the bald eagle, the "general proportions with the wing extended and especially of the arrangement of his feathers *below* the wings when extended." The eagle that Franzoni started looked Italian, Roman, or Greek, but Latrobe knew that unless it became authentically American it would be "detected by our Western Members."[52] Peale promptly sent a box containing the head and neck of the "American white head eagle, that was not bald, 'tho commonly called so." Peale promised that a drawing of the wings and feet would soon follow.[53]

After working on the sculptural decorations for two months, Andrei and Franzoni had proved themselves complete masters of their art. Jefferson and Latrobe were delighted with the prospect of further enrichments for the House chamber. Unsolicited, the sculptors were given a pay raise, free housing, and the right to take apprentices. The president ordered these extraordinary measures to make them content in their new jobs.[54] Latrobe wrote Mazzei an especially warm letter of thanks for his efforts on behalf of the Capitol and art in America. Mazzie was told that Andrei would model the "roses and foliage and capitals" while Franzoni would do the figural sculpture, although much of this would not be needed for some time. Between the two, Latrobe "distributed the department of *animals* to Franzoni and of *vegetables* to Andrei." The letter concluded with a "very prolix" account of the federal city, in which the author heaped scorn on the designs of the Capitol and President's House that were selected by the first president. "General Washington knew how to give liberty to his country," Latrobe wrote disdainfully, "but was wholly ignorant of art." Thornton and Hoban were treated in a similar fashion: the first was "very ignorant in architecture," while the second produced "a badly mutilated copy of a badly designed building near Dublin." Further, L'Enfant's plan had in it everything that could retard the city's growth. According to Latrobe, the only reason the government moved to the federal city was to win southern votes in President Adams' reelection bid. The history of the city preceding the Jefferson administration, particularly before 1803, when Latrobe became the surveyor of the public buildings, was a *"Gigantic Abortion."*[55] It was not unusual for Latrobe to vent his opinions among family or close associates, but unloading such indignation on Mazzei, whom he had never met, was unwarranted.

In an effort to keep construction on schedule, Jefferson asked Latrobe to predict the progress that would be made from May 1 to October 1, 1806, and to report actual progress every two weeks. The architect projected that by the first of July all the columns on the east side of the House chamber would be installed, the west architrave would be up, and all of the first-story window sash would be in place. The report filed for that period, however, shows that although the columns were in place only half of the architrave was up and none of the sash was in.[56] Work was falling behind schedule. Blagden could use at least six more stone cutters

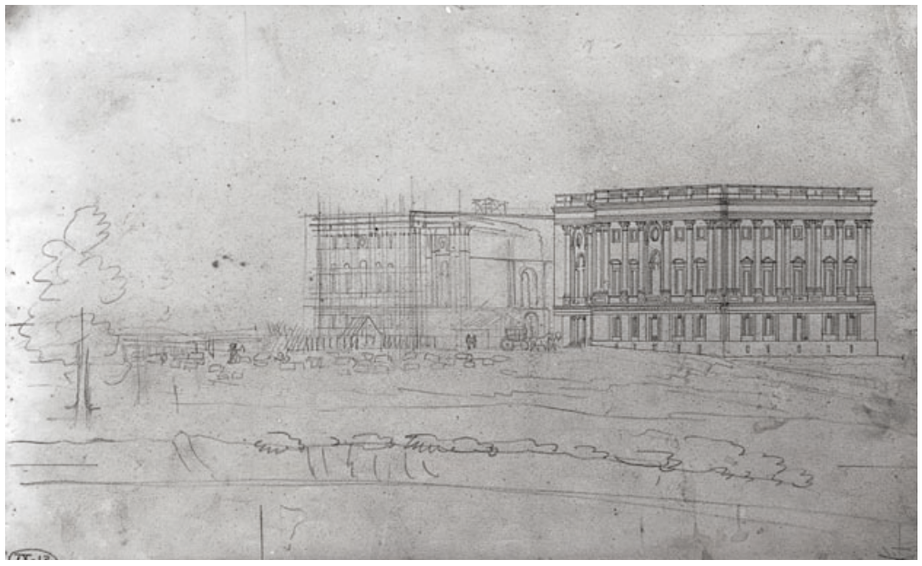
View of the Capitol from the Northeast

by B. Henry Latrobe, ca. 1806

Maryland Historical Society, Baltimore, Maryland

This unfinished sketch shows the south wing under construction standing next to the mostly completed north wing. Although identical on the exterior, the interior finishes of the two wings were very different.

Since the end of the north wing is shown as five bays wide, instead of seven, this otherwise charming sketch testifies to an imperfect memory.



and the president urged Latrobe to hire them in Philadelphia, paying traveling expenses and beginning their wages from the day they started off for Washington. But Latrobe soon discovered that master stone cutters were hard to find at any wage and thought that he might have to hire less skilled hands. He also tried to recruit cutters from New York but held out little hope for success.[57] Five stone cutters were eventually found in Philadelphia, three came from New York, and six more were expected from Albany.[58] Yet, despite these successes, the president found the stone work falling more and more behind and holding back the carpenters and plasterers. He now wanted at least twelve cutters, saying that "every day's delay in their arrival still must add to the number to be sent on. Price must not be regarded."[59] Unfortunately, the president's last statement gave Latrobe an excuse to overspend his accounts.

By mid-August all the columns were set in the House chamber and only one rough capital remained to be hoisted. Part of the frieze was also completed. The increased number of stone cutters placed a greater demand upon the quarry, which could not keep up with orders. The recess was under way at last, its first story complete and the centerings struck for the second-floor rooms.[60] (Centerings are the temporary wooden frames on which masonry arches and vaults are constructed.) A great deal of progress could be seen; however, only a miracle would finish the new chamber by December as promised.

After an absence of ten weeks, Jefferson returned to Washington at the beginning of October. He soon went to the Capitol to inspect the roof of the south wing and was dismayed to find that no provisions had been made for the panel lights. Instead, the roof framing was prepared for a central lantern. Jefferson and Latrobe had agreed that a lantern could be used temporarily if the glass for the panel lights did not arrive in time for the meeting of Congress in December. But now it was obvious that the room would not be occupied that soon, and Jefferson saw no reason to build the lantern. He wrote a stern note to Lenthall ordering the lantern abandoned and the panel lights built. Upon learning of the president's displeasure, Latrobe wrote another apologetic letter saying that the roof framing would accommodate the panel lights but hoped the president would reconsider using them. Twenty years of experience convinced the architect that the panel lights would permit unpleasant light to fall upon members' desks every sunny day and water to drip upon their heads when the weather changed from warm to cold. The glass for the skylights, ordered from Germany in December 1805, had not yet arrived and Latrobe postponed making the frames. His apology concluded with two more objections to this method of lighting the House chamber: it

would give the room an inappropriate "air of the highest gaiety," and would lack a "unity of light" that was necessary to show architecture and sculpture to advantage.[61]

Despite all the appeals, Jefferson refused to abandon the Halle au Bled dome. He was delighted with the architect's substitution of glass panels for the continuous skylights because the lighting would be milder, the light could be easily controlled by venetian blinds, the chance of leaks was far less, and the arrangement was original. The beauty of the ceiling could not be doubted because the world had already handed down its verdict in Paris. If the experiment failed, the lantern could be built, but Jefferson was not willing to abandon the panel lights without a trial.[62]

EXPLANATIONS AND EXCUSES

Latrobe's 1806 annual report was another explanation of the reasons why the south wing remained unfinished. Difficulty with stone delivery was cited as the principal cause of disappointment, although "every encouragement was offered to the quarriers to make extraordinary exertions." The roof framing, plastering, and carpentry, which depended on finishing the interior stonework, also lagged behind schedule. Lack of an established building industry in the infant city put a strain on those who undertook large projects such as the Capitol's south wing. The need to bring in materials from distant places, such as lumber from Maryland's Eastern Shore or lime from New England, also tended to retard progress. And while he had already been granted two appropriations for completing the south wing, Latrobe asked for more money to finish the work in 1807.[63]

Latrobe had promised the president that the wing would be ready for the House by December 1, 1806, and now found that promise impossible to keep. Jefferson, too, was chagrined at not being able to seat the House in its new chamber. When the president transmitted Latrobe's report to Congress he claimed to have taken every step possible to complete the room and deeply regretted that it was not possible to fulfill the commitment.[64]

Fearing that his annual report would not adequately explain the matter, Latrobe spent three nights writing a pamphlet that he printed with the title *Private Letter*. It was ready to distribute to members of Congress when the session began but was not shown to Jefferson because it had to be rushed to the printer.[65] Latrobe anticipated the disappointment that was sure to be felt by those who expected to occupy the new hall and knew he would be blamed for cooping them up in the library for yet another session. Latrobe was attacked in the press for purposefully drawing out construction in order to keep his salary, and he was accused of neglecting his duty during long absences from Washington. These accusations were, in Latrobe's words, "extremely scurrilous."[66] His *Private Letter* was the best way to defend himself against the storm of criticism that was brewing and sure to break once Congress convened.

Why the south wing remained unfinished was the main topic of Latrobe's letter. Despite a painful and dangerous illness he believed his duties had not been neglected due to the hard work of his zealous clerk, John Lenthall. As much work was done to finish the south wing as could be done, and no amount of money or manpower could have done more. He regretted that anything he might have said during the last session was construed as a pledge to finish the hall. Latrobe apparently forgot his letter to Philip Thompson, written at the end of 1804, in which he stated that $100,000 would guarantee completion of the hall in 1806. He also forgot that Congress granted $110,000 in 1805 and another $40,000 in 1806 on the strength of that promise. Although the promises were in writing, Latrobe now claimed the pledge was a minor misunderstanding.

Switching to offense, Latrobe embarked on yet another denunciation of the architecture of the Capitol and the method employed to select its design. Architectural competitions, such as the ones held in 1792 for the Capitol and President's House, were common but self-defeating. Trained architects would never think of entering such a race, which attracts only charlatans who win through influence. With Dr. Thornton in mind, Latrobe wrote:

> It brings into all the personal vanity of those who think they have knowledge and taste in an art which they have never had an opportunity

> to learn or practice—of all those who enticed by the reward think that personal influence and interest will procure it for them—and all those who know of design nothing but its execution: and it keeps out of the competition all who have too much self-respect to run the race of preference with such motley companions.

As for the style of the Capitol, Latrobe flatly said that it was hopelessly old fashioned. He realized that most people reading the *Private Letter* would not understand matters of architectural style, but he thought it worthwhile to instruct them. Unless his audience was aware of the profound change in architectural thought following the first published illustrations of Grecian antiquities in the 1760s, there would be no way that they could appreciate the rising preference for "graceful and refined simplicity" inspired by the "chaste and simple building of the best days of Athens." This aesthetic was relatively new and contrary to the teachings found in publications written prior to the 1760s. He was against the common practice of overloading walls with useless wreaths, festoons, drapery, rustic piers, and pilasters. If ornament did not contribute to the strength of a building, or convey a sense its function, it had no place in its design. He further observed that a reliance on ornamentation was usually accompanied by a decline in art and a general increase in artistic ignorance.

Latrobe's statement would be better understood a generation later by devotees of the Greek revival. But to his audience in 1806, it may have seemed little more than an artistic temper tantrum. Legislators were probably more interested in Latrobe's final topic, which was money. He was able to show that the south wing would ultimately cost $216,000 [sic]. While not an inconsiderable sum, it was $61,000 less than what the board of commissioners had spent to build the north wing. And the south wing was completely vaulted, except for the wooden ceiling over the chamber, while plaster was falling off rotting laths in the Senate chamber. Stairs were stone instead of wood. The roof would be covered with iron instead of painted shingles. Freestone columns holding a stone entablature carved with an American eagle were found in the south wing, compared with decaying wooden columns in the other wing. The architect's ability to provide such elegance, permanence, and convenience in the south wing for less money than was expended to build its inferior counterpart must surely acquit him of any blame for its slow construction. "What has been done, excepting those parts necessarily made of wood, will be as permanent as the hill upon which the building is erected," Latrobe proudly proclaimed.

Despite his best efforts, Latrobe's *Private Letter* failed to quiet criticism. On December 15, 1806, one of the administration's most acerbic critics, John Randolph of Virginia, called on the president to give the House a full account of the money spent on the Capitol, the President's House, the cabinet offices, the Navy Yard, and the Marine Barracks. Congressmen Willis Alston of North Carolina and Gideon Olin of Vermont noted that such a detailed disclosure might embarrass public officers, but Randolph said the information was necessary to form a standard of comparison when it came time to vote another appropriation for the Capitol. He wanted to know what "this sink of expense" had cost the nation. In the case of the Capitol's south wing, he recalled that each appropriation made over the past several years was supposedly the last. Latrobe was the culprit, Randolph thought, for it was he who had "always fallen short of the promises made."[67]

On February 13, 1807, amid grumbles from unhappy congressmen, the House of Representatives began debate on an appropriation of $25,000 that would hopefully finish the south wing. A separate appropriation of $20,000 was sought to buy new furniture. Andrew Gregg of Pennsylvania noted that Congress had been in the federal city for seven years, and from the look of things, it would be another seven years until their hall would be ready. And while the south wing was not yet finished, the north wing was crumbling around them. Philip Van Cortland of New York did not understand why some of his colleagues considered the appropriation unnecessary. If none were made, he pointed out, the building would not be finished in "seventy times seven years." John G. Jackson of Virginia found it hard to believe that $20,000 was needed to furnish one room. If the money were granted, he thought the surveyor of public buildings would be obliged to buy "gilded chairs" and "plated tables." The Speaker of the House, Nathaniel Macon of North Carolina, supported the appropriation for furniture which, considering the size of the new hall and the number of committee rooms and offices, would require the full $20,000.

He thought reducing the appropriation might spoil the room for want of one or two thousand dollars. Saying that sitting in the House of Representatives was honor enough, Joseph Lewis of Virginia declared that he was willing to sit on a stool if necessary but supported the appropriation for new furniture because the old would not suit. By the time the votes were taken, the full $25,000 was appropriated to finish the south wing and $17,000 was voted to furnish it.[68]

The two main issues concerning Latrobe during the 1807 building season were decorating the vast ceiling above the chamber and procuring glass for the panel lights. On December 30, 1806, he wrote John Joseph Holland, a set designer and decorator in Philadelphia, asking him to paint the ceiling. Latrobe described it as a "plain surface of stucco . . . to be painted in imitation of panels enriched with roses, and carved moldings." Apparently they had discussed the matter before, but the artist was reluctant to come to Washington. Trying flattery, the architect declared that it would be a great honor to have his building "overshadowed by Your ceiling."[69] Holland first accepted the offer but later backed off. Latrobe turned to Boston architect Charles Bulfinch for help in finding someone to paint the ceiling. He said he eventually wanted a "first-rate hand in chiaro oscuro" from Italy or England to paint the ceiling, but for now would settle for an artist to paint simple panels and borders.[70]

It is not known if Bulfinch played a role in the outcome, but the artist who painted the ceiling was George Bridport from Philadelphia, a native of England who was an architect as well as a decorative painter. Although Latrobe wanted the painting done by the time the chamber was occupied in the fall of 1807, Bridport did not begin the work until June 1808. It took all summer to complete. Working on a scaffold, Bridport suffered from the heat, which caused him to lose weight and groan loudly.[71] Yet he survived, and the results of his labor delighted the architect. To the president, Latrobe wrote: "Mr. Bridport's ceiling will do him great honor. I fear the Members will think it too fine, and I doubt not but Mr. Randolph will abuse it."[72] Bridport was paid $3,500 for the labor, paint, and gold leaf used in decorating the ceiling.[73]

Glass ordered from Germany in December 1805 had still not arrived by January 1807. Latrobe gave up hope and tried to find other sources for glass in Philadelphia, New York, Albany, and Boston without success. He was obliged to order it from England and, failing a transatlantic disaster, expected delivery by July 1807. To compensate for breakage, he ordered exactly twice the quantity needed. At the same time, he ordered a chandelier and ten lamps for the chamber and more for the passages, offices, and committee rooms.[74]

While waiting for the glass to arrive, Latrobe directed that the panel lights be boarded over. In mid-April heavy rains driven by high winds forced water through the openings into the roof structure and ruined a great quantity of the fresh plaster in the hall. To prevent a recurrence of the problem, Latrobe proposed to replace the wooden coverings with $1,000 worth of lead. Again Latrobe pleaded with Jefferson to allow him to substitute a lantern for the panel lights: "there is no order of yours that would add more to my happiness," he wrote. A watertight roof was a practical consideration that should, in his view, overrule all other considerations—including beauty. Latrobe asked: "Can beauty still be sacrificed to the *certainty* of a practical security?"[75]

Jefferson would not budge from his opposition to lanterns and lectured the architect on matters of history, precedent, and taste. He could not recall seeing a lantern or cupola on classical buildings and supposed them to be invented in Italy for hanging church bells. They were therefore "degeneracies of modern architecture," which he found quite offensive.[76]

There could be no doubt that lanterns would never appear on the Capitol as long as Thomas Jefferson was president. The whole episode showed Jefferson rigidly bound to his books and, like the lawyer he was, devoted to the high authority of precedent. Latrobe replied with a discussion of the difference between the buildings of the classical world and classical architecture in their epoch. He would copy Roman or Greek buildings if they would suit the climate or could meet modern functional requirements. But modern churches were necessarily different from ancient temples, modern legislative assemblies and courts were different from ancient basilicas, and modern amusements could not be performed in open-air theaters. Liberties were sometimes taken to adapt classical architecture to the American climate and society and the issue of cupolas was one such case. He again

emphasized that it was not the visual effect of a cupola that he wanted, but its usefulness.[77] The argument, however, fell on deaf ears.

July came and went without the arrival of the glass shipment. In mid-August, Latrobe wrote the president at Monticello to report on the leaking roof over the House chamber, again despairing for his reputation and his standing among members who would soon be seated under it. He was already unpopular and did not want to aggravate the situation by appearing to be insolent. "To place Congress at their next session under a leaky roof," Latrobe warned, "would be considered almost as an *insult* to the Legislature after what passed at the last Session." Latrobe traced the leaks to brittle putty and a large buckle in the iron. Water entering through cracks caused small streams to run down the ceiling, staining it with the rust from thousands of nails.

Latrobe feared for Jefferson's reputation as well. A leaking roof over the heads of congressmen would put them in no mood to support the president's ambitions for the public buildings in Washington. "The next Session is to decide," he told the president, "not my fate only, but the whole dependance which congress shall in the future place upon anything which may be proposed by you on the subject of public works." And what a pity it would be, he suggested, to deprive the nation of Jefferson's taste in the arts:

> It is no flattery to say that *you* have planted the arts in your country. The works already erected in this city are the monuments of your judgement and of your zeal, and of your taste. The *first* sculpture that adorned an American public building, perpetuates your love and your protection of the arts. As to myself, I am not ashamed to say, that my pride is not a little flattered, and my professional ambition roused, when I think that my grandchildren may at some future day read that after the turbulence of revolution and of faction which characterized the first two presidencies, their ancestor was the instrument in *your* hands to decorate the tranquility, the prosperity, and the happiness of your Government.[78]

Despite Latrobe's eloquence, Jefferson retained the panel lights. The leaks would be fixed by shingling between them, preserving the skylights and securing the dazzling effect of the Halle au Bled dome.[79] Persistent in the cause of a roof that would not leak, Latrobe was thwarted at every turn by Jefferson, who was equally persistent in the cause of beauty.

In mid-August 1807 the glass for the panel lights at last arrived in Philadelphia. With it came an invoice for $4,130, a great sum that promised to cripple the Capitol's accounts.[80] But at least the glass could be installed, and the House would finally have use of its new chamber. Jefferson had called Congress into session on October 26 to consider America's response to the outrages inflicted by Great Britain on the nation's neutrality during the Napoleonic Wars. British warships routinely stopped American vessels on the pretext that deserters from her navy were on board. Without proof of citizenship, American seamen were routinely forced into British service, and the call for retaliation and justice grew stronger every day. In an effort to avoid an open conflict with a superior enemy, Congress and the Jefferson administration enacted an embargo that closed American ports to foreign trade. The legislation passed in December 1807, as members of the House of Representatives sat under 100 skylights glazed with British glass received a few months before the embargo took effect. Had the sequence of events been slightly different, Jefferson would have been forced to abandon his skylights and allow Latrobe to light the chamber with a lantern glazed with small panes of American glass.

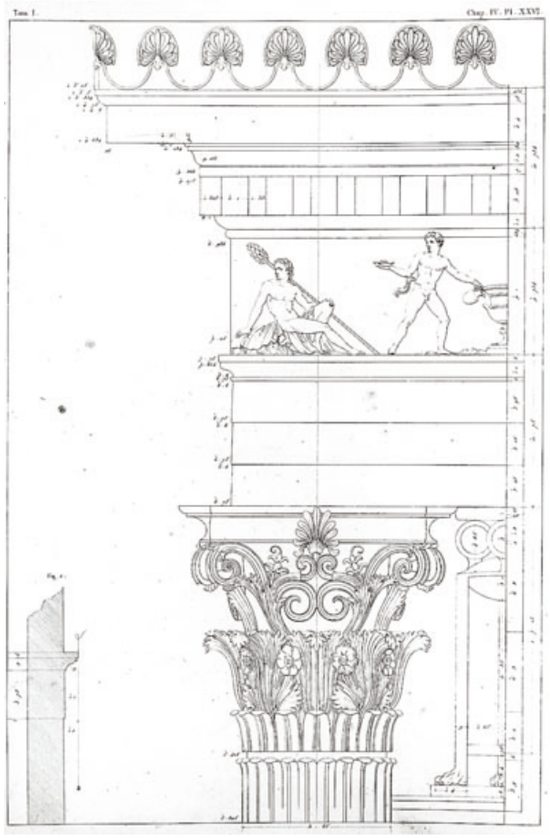
DRAPERY AND DEFICITS

Following discussions about which order to use in the House chamber, Jefferson abandoned his initial preference for Doric and decided it should be Corinthian. Which example to draw upon was another matter. Latrobe preferred Grecian models, while Jefferson was decidedly partial to Roman ones. Eventually a compromise was struck. For the columns, Jefferson approved using the exquisite Grecian order from the Choragic Monument of Lysicrates, but he urged Latrobe to design the entablature with modillions—something he admired in Roman architecture. Latrobe obliged and modeled a Roman entablature to go with the Grecian columns.[81] Before the chamber opened

Andrei had time to finish only two capitals and would attend to the rest as time permitted. Franzoni completed a figure of Liberty, and while it was only a model, it did the artist "infinite credit." He also began carving four allegorical figures to be mounted opposite the Speaker's chair representing Art, Science, Agriculture, and Commerce. Marble mantels from Philadelphia were installed in the first-floor offices and committee rooms. As the wing was being finished, it became something of a tourist attraction, drawing unwanted visitors who interrupted the work and souvenir hunters who carried off whatever they could. Latrobe asked Jefferson to order the building off limits to anyone not employed there. If presidential intervention was considered too high a sanction, Latrobe was prepared to issue the order himself.[82] Scaffolding was removed from the chamber in mid-September, but while the hall was ready for use, Latrobe thought it still looked somewhat incomplete.[83]

To celebrate the virtual completion of the Capitol's south wing, Latrobe hosted a banquet for workmen. The treat was a custom expected by the workmen as a reward for their labors and "contributed considerably to the good humor and alacrity with which they performed their duty." Held on Saturday, October 17, the supper was attended by 167 people and was marred only by the conspicuous absence of John Lenthall, who boycotted in a dispute over the guest list. All skilled hands were invited, as were men from the Navy Yard who helped out occasionally, but Latrobe deliberately did not invite the lower-class laborers. Lenthall felt that all workers should have been included and his boycott greatly embarrassed Latrobe.[84]

Reaction in the press to the new House chamber was mixed. Newspapers sympathetic to the administration ran favorable reviews, while the Federalist press focused on the room's faulty acoustics. Samuel Harrison Smith, editor of Washington's *National Intelligencer,* called it "the handsomest room in the world occupied by a deliberative body." He recalled that on entering the hall, the spectator was overwhelmed with a "strong sensation of pleasure, from the splendor and elegance of all that surrounds him."[85] But the *True American and Commercial Advertiser* of Philadelphia noted that the room suffered from a "very material defect." A speaker's voice was lost in echoes and nothing could be distinctly understood.



Corinthian Order of the Choragic Monument of Lysicrates, Athens

From the 1825 edition of *The Antiquities of Athens* by James Stuart and Nicholas Revett

Jefferson approved using the Grecian Corinthian order of the Choragic Monument of Lysicrates in the House chamber. (A different entablature was designed by Latrobe so that it might have modillions, which the president admired in Roman architecture.) The details of the order were illustrated in *The Antiquities of Athens,* published in three volumes in London in 1763, 1790, and 1795. Jefferson owned the first volume and the Library Company of Philadelphia had a copy as early as 1770.

The intricate capitals were carved in the House chamber by Giovanni Andrei. After the room was destroyed in 1814, Andrei supervised replication of the capitals in marble during a trip to Italy.

Only by close attention was it barely possible to gain an idea of what was happening amid the chamber's "floating reverberations."[86]

The *Washington Federalist* reported that John Randolph considered the room "admirably suited to every purpose which would be required except one . . . that of debate." According to this anti-administration paper, hearing in the House chamber was so difficult that only a forge, a mill, or a coppersmith's shop would offer a less hospitable environment for debate.[87]

Latrobe complained privately to Lenthall (who had returned to the architect's good graces) that his original proposal for a half domed semicircular room of a lower height would have made a much better speaking room. He also noted that while newspaper writers condemned the chamber's acoustics, "they report the debates as regularly and minutely as if they caught every word."[88] To his brother, Latrobe admitted the room had an acoustical problem, but he planned to "go to work with Tapestry &C. to destroy the echoes."[89] Draping the

colonnade would muffle the echoes and add even more texture and color to an already splendid room.

Latrobe wrote a detailed description of the south wing for the *National Intelligencer*. The newspaper asked for the article in order to satisfy the public's curiosity, but Latrobe used the occasion to defend the work against slanders printed in the Federalist press.[90] Latrobe's essay began with a short history of the Capitol, its dimensions, and a description of its exterior appearance and the original plan. Before describing the alterations made to the internal arrangements of the south wing, Latrobe thought it necessary to pay Dr. Thornton a left-handed compliment for his talents "which a regular professional education, and a practical knowledge of architecture would have ripened into no common degree of excellence." Thus, the only things missing from Dr. Thornton's potential as a real architect, Latrobe said, were training and experience. More sincere praise was given George Hadfield's contribution to the exterior design. His "exquisite taste" was responsible for the introduction of the "impost entablature," which gave "an harmonious character to the whole mass." While Latrobe wanted to publicly acknowledge Hadfield, he was probably mistaken in the instance cited. The Capitol's belt course (carved with a guilloche) was more likely part of Thornton's original design. But this was not the first time Latrobe was mistaken about who designed what in the building's murky past.

With the preliminaries dispensed with, Latrobe began a description of the wing as it was redesigned and built: "All the apartments are vaulted with hard bricks, and scarcely anything in the whole building is of timber, excepting the doors, windows and their dressings, the platforms of the House and galleries, and the roof of the Hall itself." He was particularly proud of the plan and accommodations of the office story because of the difficulties that were overcome. The size of the challenge made his success all the more gratifying.

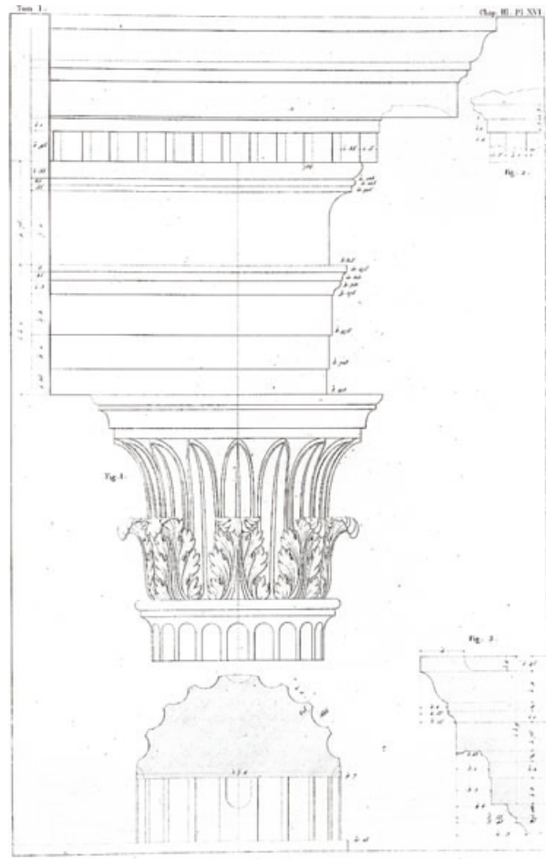
Upstairs, the House chamber "consists of two semi-circles 60 feet in diameter . . . united by straight lines 25 feet in length . . . so that the internal space . . . is nearly 85 by 60." A wall seven feet high carried the twenty-four Corinthian columns, which were twenty-six feet, eight inches high; these in turn, supported an entablature six feet high. Latrobe paid high compliments to Andrei for the skillful carving shown in the two completed capitals and to Franzoni for his "colossal eagle in the act of rising." Franzoni's personifications of Art, Science, and Agriculture in the frieze above the main entrance to the hall were finished; the figure of Commerce was incomplete. They were carved in high relief and, in Latrobe's opinion, were "exquisitely beautiful." The statue of Liberty behind the Speaker's chair was a hastily completed plaster model that Latrobe hoped would soon be reproduced in Vermont marble. It was a seated female figure, eight and a half feet tall, holding a liberty cap in one hand and a scroll in the other. An eagle stood guard to one side of the figure, its foot resting on a crown and other emblems of monarchy and bondage. Above the statue was a crimson silk curtain with green lining. "The effect of this curtain, of the statue, and of the Speaker's chair and canopy," Latrobe wrote, "is perhaps the most pleasing assemblage of objects that catches the eye in the whole room." Other subjects were covered in the article, but the sculptural decorations seem to have been the architect's greatest source of satisfaction.[91]

A "sound committee" of the House approved Latrobe's plan to combat echoes by hanging heavy flannel drapery—with black, yellow, and red fringe—between the columns.[92] Lenthall was asked to devise something from which to suspend the curtains, preferably a strong plank held by the abacus of the column capital. Latrobe wanted the curtains to hang down nearly twenty feet, reaching within seven or eight feet of the column bases. "The thing will be handsome," Latrobe wrote, "and take half the echo." He did not care if those behind the curtains could see or hear: "Why should there not be an embargo on Sound as well as on Flour?"[93] The curtains were in place by the end of February and were, according to Latrobe, both beautiful and effective.

Usually the annual report of the surveyor of public buildings was transmitted soon after the opening of Congress. The 1807 report, however, was not submitted until March 25, 1808, only four weeks before the end of the first session of the 10th Congress. Latrobe excused the delay by saying he was unable to close the accounts because work was still going on at the Capitol and the President's House. In the part of the report concerning the south wing, he listed those few details that were needed to finish the building. The woodwork

Vestibule of the House of Representatives

The earliest example of a Greek order extant in America is exhibited in this small circular vestibule, located between the rotunda and the old House of Representatives. The vestibule was completed in 1807 and left undamaged by the fire of 1814. Paint analysis indicates that a light straw color was originally used on the dome, coffers, and ornaments. (1999 photograph.)



Tower of the Winds, Athens

From the 1825 edition of *The Antiquities of Athens* by James Stuart and Nicholas Revett

Capital Detail

Latrobe modeled the columns after the ancient Tower of the Winds but added a stem between the upper water leaves. (1999 photograph.)

was only primed and needed to be painted. Twenty-two column capitals in the chamber and two in the circular vestibule (today called the "small House rotunda") still needed to be carved and the cornice in the chamber was not yet finished. Ten mantels awaited installation and the pavement along the south front needed to be laid. Latrobe praised the work of Franzoni and Andrei and reminded his readers that their work would take time to finish. He asked for funds to erect the western part of the recess containing three committee rooms and an apartment for the doorkeeper. In addition to providing these internal accommodations, this part of the recess was necessary to buttress the wing's northwest corner. Settlement in that area had been noticeable for some years, and while there was no immediate danger of collapse, it required "counterpoise" for stability. (It remained without "counterpoise" until 1818–1822.)

Without a hint of modesty, Latrobe's report asserted that the House of Representatives sat in a room less "liable to an objection as any other hall of debate in the United States." After minor adjustments were made, it would be "second to none in every legislative convenience." But such high praise for his own work did little to shield him from the furious storm that broke over his accounts. Latrobe nonchalantly reported that he had incurred a deficit of more than $35,000 for work on the south wing and another $4,000 deficit for furnishing it. (He had also overspent the President's House and public highways accounts.) At the beginning of the 1807 building season, Congress had appropriated $25,000 to finish the south wing—all that Latrobe asked—yet he managed to spend more than $60,000. His success with the $17,000 furniture budget was better, but that overrun was a grave embarrassment as well. Latrobe soon learned that fiscal mismanagement, whether real or perceived, could damage a reputation beyond all that allegorical statuary and crimson drapery could redeem.

Overspending the appropriations put Latrobe in the unenviable position of defending himself against the administration's friends as well as its enemies. On April 5, 1808, the House of Representatives considered an appropriation to cover the deficits. John Randolph condemned Latrobe's actions as "illegal and unjustifiable." Joseph Lewis, a Federalist from Virginia, took an opposite view of the issue. He understood that Latrobe and the workmen proceeded on their own to finish the hall despite the lack of funds. In doing so, they were only motivated by a desire to complete the room so that the House could use it and be free of the tight quarters of the library. The honorable intentions of the surveyor of public buildings and the generosity of the workmen justly demanded Congress repay them promptly. The president's son-in-law, John Wayles Eppes of Virginia, thought that Latrobe had "grossly abused his trust," but worried that innocent tradesmen and merchants would be ruined if the government failed to fund the deficits. Randolph replied that he too wished to see creditors paid but thought the accounts should be presented to the Committee on Claims. And while he thought the House chamber did Latrobe "great honor," he reminded his colleagues that "artists were not very nice calculators in money matters." David R. Williams of South Carolina, an administration supporter, gave a long speech in which he severely condemned Latrobe and his "outrageous audacity." Others spoke either of Latrobe's bad judgment or of his devotion to duty, as the case might be viewed. By the end of the day's business, the House could not agree on how to treat the deficits. On a motion offered by Eppes, the House asked Richard Stanford, chairman of the committee handling Latrobe's annual report, to inquire into the circumstances that produced the deficits. It also asked his committee to look into the wisdom of abolishing the office of the surveyor of public buildings.[94]

Latrobe replied to the committee's inquiries in a long letter written on April 8, 1808.[95] It was an admirable defense, free of the pontifical rhetoric that occasionally showed up in his writings. He began by saying that he held no government office as such, but that the surveyor's position was necessary to carry out the appropriations for the public buildings. As long as these appropriations were made, it would be necessary to have an architect in charge. He then compared his work to that of the "unprofessional," but "patriotic" commissioners and showed that the south wing cost $61,000 less than the north wing. The saving was a result of professional management. To explain how he incurred the deficits, and justify his actions in the matter, Latrobe referred to the desire of the House to occupy its chamber, its resolution asking the president to do all in his power to have the room ready, and his efforts to obey the command.

Because he was not able to have the room ready in 1806, it would have been unforgivable not to finish it in 1807. The appropriation was fully spent by September but the hall was still not finished, leaving the architect few options. He could dismiss the workmen and leave the hall unfinished or advise them of the financial situation and trust that their labors would not go unrewarded for long.

Completion of the south wing was Latrobe's first duty. To his way of thinking he had not expended unappropriated public funds but, rather, incurred debt in the public interest. To show that the workmen fully understood the situation, he presented an affidavit signed by George Blagden, stonecutter, Thomas Machen, stonemason, Simeon Meade, foreman of carpenters, Henry Ingle, cabinetmaker and ironmonger, and Griffith Coombe, lumber merchant. The document verified Latrobe's forthright dealings with the men building the south wing.

On April 21, 1808, Stanford reported the findings of his committee to the House.[96] It was a full and absolute vindication of Latrobe and his actions that incurred debt. According to the committee members, Latrobe pursued his duties with "laudable zeal" and "integrity." Considering the circumstances, questions regarding the legality of Latrobe's actions were groundless.

Four days after the Stanford report was issued, the House discussed an appropriation to cover the debts. John Randolph, of course, spoke at length against the measure. If the bill passed, Randolph warned that "they might as well open the Treasury and dismiss their accounting officers at once." But Stanford stated that Latrobe had acted in accordance with their resolution and had done his duty by finishing the chamber. His actions were, therefore, fully justifiable. By a vote of seventy-three to eight, the House appropriated $51,500 to cover the

Latrobe Committee Room

Latrobe's plan for the south wing's office story provided meeting rooms for some of the five standing committees and for the various select committees that were appointed from time to time. Structural constraints prohibited large rooms, but committees did not require much space. Shown here is a typical committee room, which retains its original marble mantel and woodwork.

Today the room (modern day H–153) serves as the office for the clerk of the House of Representatives. (1998 photograph.)

debts.[97] On the same day, a vote was taken on funding the remaining part of the recess. That measure failed, but $11,500 was given for finishing and painting the interior of the south wing.[98]

While Latrobe enjoyed his partial victory in the House, his financial dealings placed a cloud over his relationship with the president. Jefferson neither claimed responsibility in the affair nor did he blame Thomas Munroe, who was supposed to keep track of accounts. The day Congress made good on the deficit, Jefferson wrote the architect:

> The lesson of last year has been a serious one, it has done you great injury & has much been felt by myself—it was so contrary to the principles of our Government, which makes the representatives of the people the sole arbiters of the public expense, and do not permit any work to be forced on them on a larger scale than their judgment deems adopted to the circumstances of the Nation.[99]

Latrobe considered resigning. He felt that the attacks in the House by the president's son-in-law might as well have come from Jefferson himself. Blame for the deficits had been "copiously and coarsely heaped upon me by the friends of the administration in the house as well as by the federalists and the third party." Latrobe claimed that the state of the accounts was unknown to him because Munroe had spent the summer in upstate New York. He had been guided solely by Jefferson's order to hire more workmen and finish the chamber.

Writing from Monticello, Jefferson replied that Latrobe had no one to blame for the deficits other than himself. Appropriations were made from his estimates, and because these were defective, he had not enough funds to finish the wing. When he urged Latrobe to hire more workmen, it was on the assumption that "it would cost no more to employ 100 hands 50 days, than 50 hands 100 days." He never intended to suggest that money was no object. And as John Eppes was too independent to be influenced by his father-in-law, Latrobe should not consider him the president's mouthpiece. Without mentioning Latrobe's hint at resignation, the letter ended on a friendly note.[100]

Small appropriations were made in 1809 and 1810 to keep Andrei carving the capitals in the House chamber. With the room virtually complete Latrobe turned his attention to rebuilding the interior of the north wing, which would be a more difficult, and in some ways a more satisfying, task. The arrangement of the office story in the south wing, and the many conveniences it provided within a difficult space, was an accomplishment that made Latrobe proud. Although later altered in small ways, the rooms continue to be used by the House of Representatives to this day. The House chamber upstairs, however, perhaps the most beautiful room designed by Latrobe, can only be viewed in the architect's drawings. Used only six years, it was destroyed by fire in the summer of 1814.

THE NORTH WING

From the time he was appointed the surveyor of the public buildings, Latrobe was alarmed by the north wing's structural problems. Despite its recent construction, the north wing had defects more usually associated with an older building. He condemned the gutters lined with tar and sand, which disguised fissures that allowed rain to pour into the building. He disliked the skylights and wanted to protect them with lanterns, not yet having learned of Jefferson's dislike for these "degeneracies of modern architecture." In addition to water penetration, the wing was plagued by rotting timbers and falling plaster. Each year Congress granted for repairs a small sum that was split between the north wing and the President's House. Latrobe could barely keep up with the progressing decay he found in both buildings.

At the end of August 1805, Latrobe told the president about the sundry repairs made in the north wing and stated his belief that one day the entire interior would have to be removed and rebuilt. The ceiling in the northwest committee room (modern day S–143 and S–144), where the Senate had met during the second session of the Eighth Congress (1804–1805), threatened to collapse. (Ironically, it had been the dangerous condition of the Senate chamber's ceiling that forced the lawmakers to seek refuge in that committee room.) Now, the room's ceiling was cracked and Lenthall was asked to examine it. Because the laths were too closely spaced to allow the plaster to grip properly, the ceiling was deemed unsafe and was taken down. A new ceiling was installed, but it soon sagged six inches. Latrobe climbed on the scaffold and discovered a girder riddled with dry rot. He had it propped

up with a strong wooden partition that divided the room in half. The situation could not wait for Jefferson's approval: if the girder failed during the approaching session of Congress, members of the House meeting in the library above would have been thrown down into the committee room, causing certain injuries and deaths.

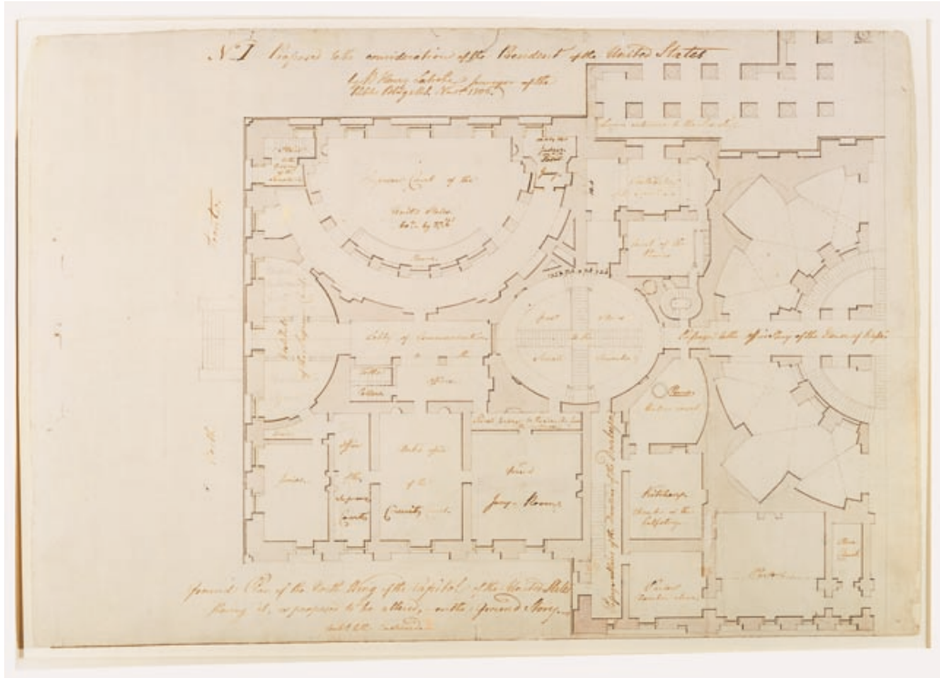
While saving the lives of congressmen, the partition created two small committee rooms where there had been only one before. With the Supreme Court set up in one committee room (modern day S–146 and S–146A) and clerks using another, rooms for Senate committees were in short supply. Only one room was available, and it was commandeered by the first senator who laid claim to it. Other committees huddled together in the Senate chamber in whatever space they could find. "Thus a Committee on a trifling business were in possession of the room," Latrobe informed the president, "while the most important affairs were transacted in a corner amidst the bustle, usually preceding the opening of the house." Another room could be created by partitioning the north vestibule, a semi-elliptical lobby with a central door flanked by two windows. Latrobe asked permission to build a wall that would capture a third of the space for a committee room.[101] The plan would result in two oddly shaped rooms, and the president was unwilling to sacrifice the beauty of the vestibule for the accommodation of Senate committees.[102]

Repairs were also needed in the Senate chamber. Particularly bothersome were the columns, which were made of wood covered with a thin coat of plaster. Cracks half an inch to an inch wide appeared down the length of three shafts. To repair these, Latrobe wrapped the columns with strong linen tied in the back. Secured by these improvised corsets, the column shafts were then freshly whitewashed. After a piece of the ceiling fell (barely missing the vice president's chair), Latrobe inspected the damage and repaired the plaster.

Such patching and mending made Latrobe impatient for the day he would rid the north wing of its rotting timbers and rebuild it with brick arches and vaults. Only such drastic measures would secure the interior from the legacy of bad materials and workmanship. The rebuilding would also present an opportunity to reconfigure the floor plan to better accommodate the Senate and the Supreme Court. While he despaired for the structural integrity of the Senate chamber, Latrobe told the president that he looked forward to "the period at which your idea of raising it up to the next story can be carried into effect."[103] Now that the House chamber was on the principal floor, Jefferson apparently wanted the Senate raised to that level as well. Raising the Senate finally resolved the old disagreement between Thornton's exterior elevation and Hallet's interior plan. (One must wonder at Jefferson's thoughts as the chambers were relocated to the principal floor during this period.) A one-story room for the Supreme Court would be built below the Senate, occupying what had been the lower portion of the old chamber. Other areas, such as the Library of Congress, committee rooms, and lobbies, would be retained in place but reconfigured by the necessities of vaulted construction.

In his 1805 annual report, Latrobe informed Congress of the decayed state of the north wing's interiors, which hardly came as news. A survey of the structure revealed alarming failures in the floors and timbers that were the result of "extremely injudicious" construction methods aggravated by widespread dry rot. Cracks in the library ceiling were investigated, but no structural defect was found. Minor repairs were made but substantial work would be postponed until after the south wing was completed.[104]

By the end of 1806, the condition of the ceiling of the room in which the House sat rattled the nerves of more than one of its members seated below. David R. Williams of South Carolina was sufficiently alarmed to offer a resolution to pull the ceiling down or otherwise secure it from what appeared to be imminent collapse. The motion stirred a lively discussion among the members, some of whom doubted Latrobe's earlier assurance of the ceiling's safety when it looked so insecure. A section of plaster had already fallen, while other parts "swagged." The clerk of the House made his own investigation and found the ceiling mostly secure, but some sections also looked dangerously weak.[105] Adding to the mounting concern, the cornice and part of the ceiling over the central lobby fell. More cracks appeared in the Senate columns, and the ceiling appeared ready to fall again. It was beyond repair and was accordingly re-plastered on new laths. Disasters became routine and convinced even recalcitrant legislators that reconstruction was necessary. Members of the House were



Ground Plan of the North Wing of the Capitol of the United States shewing it, as proposed to be altered, on the Ground Story

by B. Henry Latrobe, 1806

Retaining as much of the brick partition walls as he could, Latrobe reconfigured the plan of the north wing to accommodate a vaulted interior. This plan (with east at the top) is a preliminary scheme that would be more fully developed.

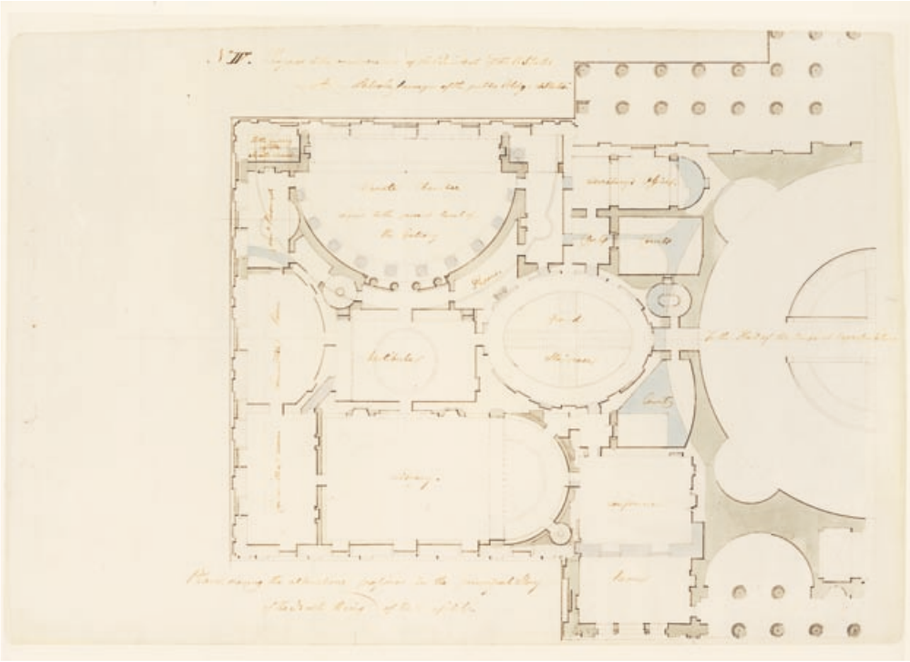
Latrobe separated those with Court business from those attending sessions of the Senate. The north door (left) was reserved for the Supreme Court and the east door (top) was exclusively for the Senate. Although this plan does not yet show columns in the east vestibule, Latrobe later designed "corn cob" columns for that space to support the weight of its vaulted ceiling.

anxious to leave the cramped and decayed library, especially when they saw what awaited them in the south wing.

Latrobe's 1806 annual report gave the first detailed account of what he and the president had in mind for the north wing's new interior. A set of plans was submitted with the written report. The whole ground floor (called the "office story" in the other wing) was reserved for the Supreme Court. The Senate would move upstairs, having use of the second and third floors. Visitors to the Court would enter through the north door, while those on Senate business would use the east door. Thus separated, neither body would interfere with the workings of the other.

The report also covered logistical matters. As soon as Congress adjourned in March 1807, Latrobe proposed to begin demolition of the eastern half of the wing, preserving much of the brick partition walls but removing all the laths, plaster, and timber from the cellar to the roof. The first phase would involve gutting the Senate chamber, the unfinished room above it, the east vestibule, the staircases, the central lobby, and the north vestibule. When Congress reconvened in the fall, the House would occupy the south wing, the Senate would meet in a committee room, while the Supreme Court would continue to use a first-floor committee room or the library. With his usual optimism, Latrobe promised that the work could be done quickly, particularly because it would be protected by the roof. He claimed that the eastern half of the wing would be finished by the time Congress convened in 1808. Work on the western half would begin in 1809 and would be finished a year later. Thus, the entire north wing would be rebuilt in only three years. To get the job started, Latrobe asked for an appropriation of $50,000.[106]

When the House reviewed the reconstruction plans on February 13, 1807, confusion gripped those who did not understand Latrobe's report or the drawings accompanying it. Some thought the plans called for the Senate chamber to be divided in half so that the Supreme Court would meet in the upper part of the old room. Others thought a new Senate chamber would replace the library in the western part of the wing. David R. Williams of South Carolina was certain the changes were proposed so the Senate would be in a physical position to send bills literally downward to the House. "If the alteration really takes place . . . " he said, "this House will be about fifteen feet lower than the Senate."[107] How he reached that conclusion is unfathomable, but it demonstrated the architectural



Plan, shewing the alterations proposed in the principal Story of the North Wing of the Capitol

by B. Henry Latrobe, 1806

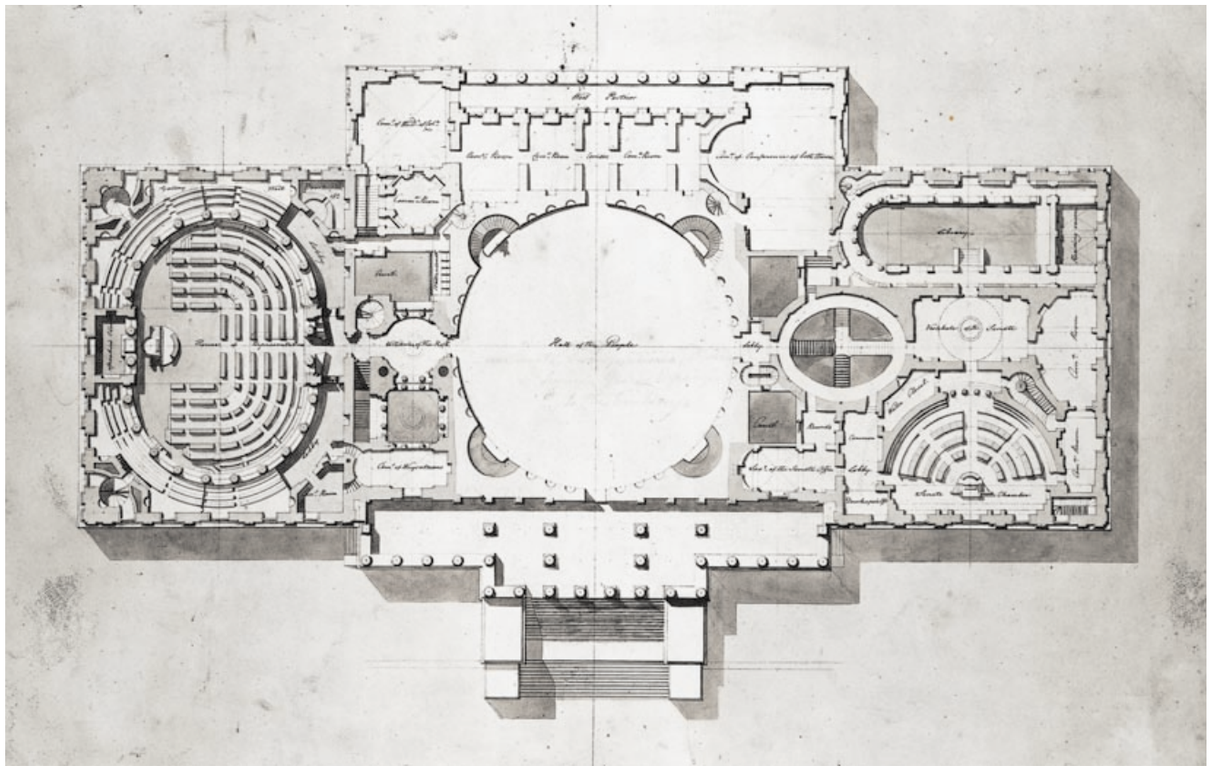
By using a simple color code, Latrobe indicated walls to be added or removed in rebuilding the north wing's interior. On this and companion plans, Latrobe also showed early ideas about the center building. The rotunda was depicted with heroic niches in the angles and stairs leading to the room below, called variously the "crypt" or the "lower rotunda." Gone was the circular conference room from the Hallet–Thornton plans, replaced by a square projection with a central colonnade.

illiteracy flourishing in the House that day. While it is not surprising that some were unable to understand the floor plans, Latrobe's clearly written report should have been intelligible to all.

At the end of debate, the House decided not to vote for any alterations. Instead, it granted $25,000 for a new roof and other repairs to the north wing. Alarmed, Latrobe wrote Pennsylvania Senator George Logan warning that if the appropriation passed in its current form, the Senate would be left with all the problems plaguing its chamber and committee rooms. The chamber needed to be cleared of arches and columns that obstructed views and blocked voices, but this was beyond the scope of repair work. He hoped the Senate would loosen the wording of the bill to allow some alterations. Yet, the Senate retained the language of the House appropriation, and the bill was approved by Jefferson on the last day of the session, March 3, 1807.

Finishing the south wing for the House of Representatives kept Latrobe busy during the 1807 building season, and he could hardly spare carpenters to re-roof the north wing until they were no longer needed on the other building. Rainy weather and a shortage of workmen meant that there was only time and manpower enough to re-roof about half the wing.[108] When the center part of the roof was stripped off, Latrobe found the timbers in an advanced state of decay. All the floors and ceilings of the Senate chamber, the library, and the lobbies were discovered to be rotten as well. Because of time constraints and the limits of the appropriation, Latrobe could do nothing to the chamber or the library, but focused instead on the central lobby and oval stair hall directly under the part of the roof being replaced. In those spaces, Latrobe removed the timber floors and laid stone or brick floors on new vaults carried by the old walls. The coved ceiling and wooden skylight over the oval stair hall were removed and replaced by a "solid brick cupola . . . crowned by a lantern light." (Considering the president's silence, the lantern presumably could not be seen from the outside.) The weak, decayed principal staircase was merely propped up for the time being.[109]

What little was done to the north wing in 1807 was just enough to show how much work was needed to put the building into first-class condition. Without debate Congress appropriated $25,000 on April 25, 1808, "for carrying up, in solid work, the interior of the north wing, comprising the Senate chamber." Congress granted these funds at the same time it made the appropriations to cover Latrobe's public debts. While this period may



Plan of the Principal Story of the Capitol. U. S.

by B. Henry Latrobe, ca. 1808

Library of Congress

Latrobe's overall scheme for the Capitol was presented in this drawing. It shows the south wing as finished, the north wing that was undergoing a partial reconstruction, and the center building that was not as yet approved or funded. The rotunda was labeled "Hall of the People" with the notation that it was intended for "Impeachments, Inaugu[r]ations, Divine Service, General access to the buildings."

have been a low point in the architect's popularity, the appropriation for the north wing was a small but a welcome vote of confidence.

LIBEL

The day after the appropriation for the north wing passed, Latrobe opened the *National Intelligencer* to find a letter from Dr. Thornton publicly attacking him. Considering the unflattering way Latrobe had depicted Thornton in print, this assault should not have come as a surprise. But its severity and fanatic assertions were shocking. Supposedly, the letter was in response to Latrobe's description of the south wing, printed in the *Intelligencer* on November 30, 1807, in which he "had the presumption to assume the character of a public Censor." To defend himself Thornton described Latrobe's reports to Congress as "full of miscalculations and misrepresentations." He denied Latrobe's assertion that the design of the Capitol had been improved by George Hadfield and defended the original design and parts of the composition that Latrobe criticized. In his writing, Thornton used a sort of verbal smoke screen that is difficult to follow, employing maxims and rules of his own invention that had a ring of authority. For example, Thornton wrote about a small feature of the Capitol's elevation—the shallow arch in the center bay of each wing—and greatly exaggerated its significance. He said the arch was "bold" and so "neatly equidistant" that it produced a "fine effect and great harmony." Sounding profound, Thornton proclaimed: "Minute beauty may terminate where grandeur and

sublimity commence." Beneath the rhetoric, there was no real meaning to the statement.

There was similar bombast about the oak foliage above the arched windows. Next came the matter of education and experience: "Because I was not educated as Architect, am I therefore to permit Mr. Latrobe to decide upon my merits or demerits? —No." After all, Thornton had traveled in Europe, was acquainted with the best buildings from antiquity, and knew something about the orders of architecture. As a profession, medical doctors examined a variety of subjects during their course of study, and it was common for them to pick up one or two other specialities later on. Thornton proudly reminded readers of the *Intelligencer* that Claude Perrault, the architect of the Louvre, was also a doctor.

The latter part of Thornton's attack was pure fantasy. He claimed that Latrobe had been educated not as an architect but as a "carver of chimney pieces in London." Thus, an upholsterer had as much right to call himself an architect. The next fabrication was about Latrobe's immigration to America as a *"Missionary of the Moravians."* Rather than to design churches, Thornton said, his rival was sent to this country to build up the Moravian church. These silly taunts paled in comparison to the story about George Washington's lack of faith in Latrobe. Thornton said that a "very respectable gentleman now living" asked Washington why he did not employ Latrobe and was told: "Because I can place no confidence in him whatever." Thornton's next accusation was that the architect had changed his name. Using satire, sarcasm, and wit, Thornton then ventured into a wholesale condemnation of Latrobe's south wing. The sculptural group over the Speaker's rostrum was ridiculed in a manner that nicely illustrates Thornton's style of attack:

> To embellish the room, he had the Eagle carved so often, that it equals the Ibis in the Tombs of the Egyptians, but they are as much like the Harpies as Eagles. The one on the Frieze of the Entablature is so flat, that the country people mistake it for the skin of an owl, such as they nail on their barn doors: Glumdalca, [queen of the giants in Fielding's farce *Tom Thumb*] fabricated of straw, and plaster of Paris, to represent the Figure of Liberty resting on the Eagle, is taken for a gigantic representation of Leda and her Swan: and the minikin eagle over the Speaker's head, is taken for a Sparrow.

The gate at the Navy Yard, the wall around the President's House, the Bank of Pennsylvania, and the Philadelphia Waterworks shared Thornton's scorn. His final ridicule was directed at the gate into the president's garden: "Though in humble imitation of a triumphal Arch, it looks so naked, and so disproportionate, that it is more like a monument than a Gateway; but no man now or hereafter will ever mistake it for a *monument of taste.*"[110]

Latrobe's response was swift and calm. Writing to the *Intelligencer* on April 26, 1808, he characterized the abuse as "coarse" and regretted that his previous references to Thornton had been "too flattering." People who knew Thornton would pay no attention to his latest rant, but it was due his family as well as himself to refute some of the more atrocious accusations. The stories about carving chimney pieces and missionary work were both groundless, although he would not have been ashamed if either were true. He recalled his last visit with Washington at Mount Vernon, during which time he had no favors to ask nor did his host have any to grant. "The whole story," Latrobe wrote, "is a malicious fabrication—impossible in all its circumstances of time and place." He defended his design for the Bank of Pennsylvania against Thornton's assertion that it was nothing more than a copy of a Greek temple. Thornton's observations were stupid and he was "too ignorant, vain, and despicable for argumentative refutation."[111]

Strangely, President Jefferson did nothing to stop these men from airing their differences in public. Both held positions in the administration and would have yielded to a presidential command to desist. But Jefferson remained quiet. The next volley was lobbed by Thornton in the *Washington Federalist* of May 7, 1808, in what was an amplification of his earlier letter. In it Thornton railed with gusto, skewering Latrobe with his special brand of contorted sarcasm. In one passage, Thornton expanded upon his assertion that Latrobe's career in London was spent carving mantels:

> To call him a carver of chimney pieces was meant to shew that his high assumption of the character of an architect has not been of long standing. His mode of behavior to me must have originated in his old habits of carving chimney pieces. He cut and hewed at me in a very rough manner, in private (in his private letters to Congress) then polished and smoothed down to give a kind of gloss, in public; but I had not

forgotten the chisel strokes in private, and understood better than the public his subsequent meaning.

The letter concluded with a story that stretched Thornton's credibility to the limit. He said that he had accepted a challenge to a duel, but when he went to the field, Latrobe was no where to be found. For three days, Thornton waited with his second and surgeon, unaware that Latrobe had been "bound over to the peace." He returned to town and sent a note saying that while the matter was now settled, he was nonetheless ready to take up the challenge again. Latrobe, the coward, failed to reply and Thornton concluded: "I received no answer, and despise his threats, as much as I despise the man."[112]

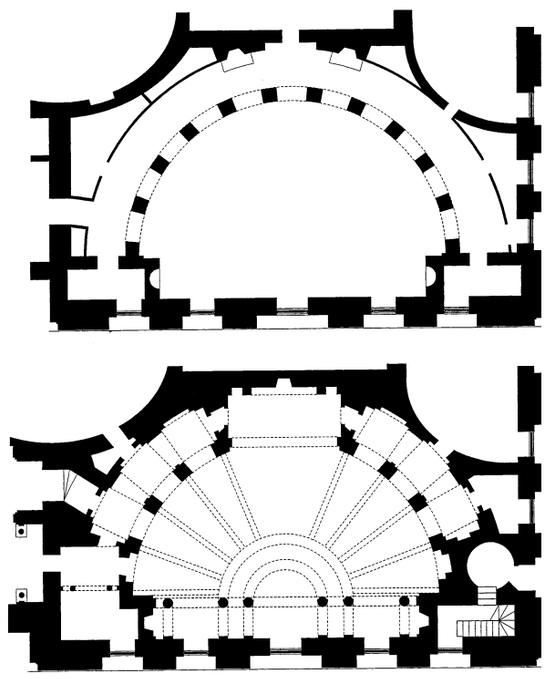
The *Washington Federalist* carried a short reply from Latrobe saying no more would be heard from him due to a libel suit filed on his behalf against Thornton. Thus a jury would decide "whether the Doctor be an original inventor, or only a second hand retailer of falsehood."[113] Latrobe's complaint, filed on May 28, 1808, asked for $10,000 in damages plus court costs.

A FATAL ACCIDENT

While lawyers prepared their cases, Latrobe began work on the east side of the north wing by demolishing all the flooring and ceilings from the cellar to the roof. As a public exhibit, he laid out rotten girders, plates, and joists for all to see. Although he had hoped to reuse it, Latrobe also tore out the brick arcade in the Senate chamber after discovering the piers were built on wooden plates, which were rotten. The arcade was also found to be laid out on a partly circular, partly elliptical plan and it would have been nearly impossible to contrive a uniform vault to spring from it.[114] A month earlier, Jefferson had told Latrobe to leave the arcade in place and reuse the old wooden columns unless it was clear that they could afford stone columns.[115] Jefferson's instructions were shaped by his dread of incurring another deficit, a fear that surely clouded his judgment. Impractical and unwise, the shortcuts were mercifully ignored.

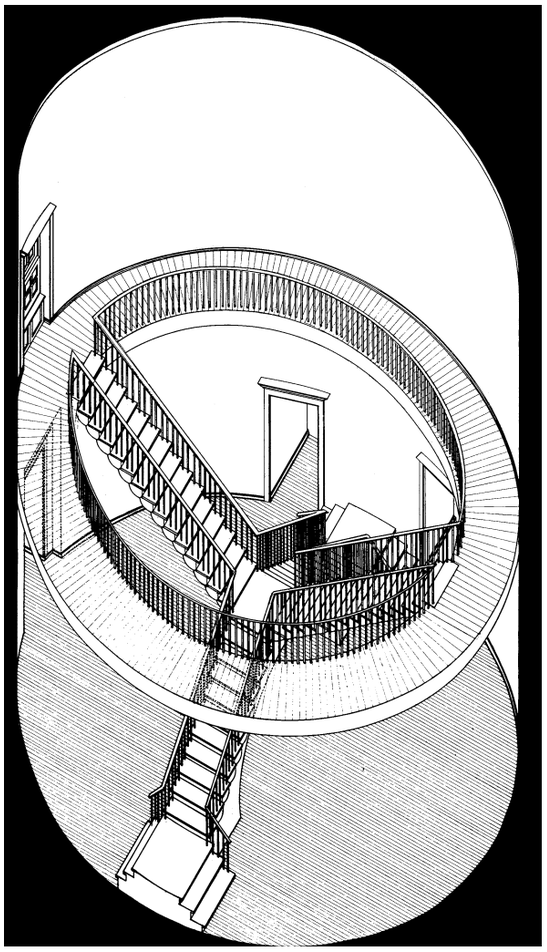
Latrobe's plans for reconstructing the interior of the north wing were as inventive and daring as anything he had attempted before. Unlike building from the ground up, this job involved preserving the outside shell and most of the interior walls and inserting a vaulted structure within that tenuous envelope. The new work could not depend on old walls for support. Rather, the new skeleton was used to strengthen the outside skin. Like builders in the Middle Ages, Latrobe used the outside walls as screens that performed virtually no structural function. Instead of transferring structural loads via exterior flying buttresses, the north wing vaulting was supported on new interior columns and piers built within inches of the old walls. Each room presented its own challenge, and Latrobe's solutions were as ingenious as the problems were difficult.

During the summer of 1808, while Latrobe was in Philadelphia, Lenthall pushed the work with



Lower Plan of the Original Senate Chamber Prior to Reconstruction (top). Supreme Court Vaulting Plan (bottom)

Comparing "before" and "after" plans illustrates the transformation that took place within the existing walls of the north wing. In creating the Supreme Court chamber, Latrobe built new masonry supports to hold heavy ceiling vaults while imposing little additional weight or lateral pressure on the old walls.



North Wing Principal Staircase
Conjectural Reconstruction, 1989

This unusual stone stair was built in the north wing's oval hall in 1808, heavily damaged by the fire of 1814, and not rebuilt during the subsequent restoration. Latrobe's design was probably inspired by Sir William Chambers' Navy Staircase (also called the Oval Stair) located in Somerset House, London.

great energy. By the second week in September all the arches and vaults were in place, including those over the Supreme Court and the Senate chambers. To cover the Senate, Latrobe devised a half dome sixty feet in diameter springing from a new, semicircular western wall to a stout arch built against the old east wall. Thus, the room's plan was similar to the previous Senate chamber but was slightly smaller and no longer had a flat ceiling. It was also unencumbered by the former arcade that took up space and blocked views and voices. At the crown of the brick dome were one semicircular and five circular skylights protected from the weather by a wooden monitor roof. Latrobe planned to paint the underside of the monitor roof with imitation coffers, thus giving it the appearance of a second dome. In a final sleight of hand, the source of light feeding the skylights from the roof was hidden from view.

The floor of the new Senate chamber rested on the vaults covering the Supreme Court. Because the Court was only one story high, the rise of its dome was quite shallow compared with its span. Latrobe planned to divide the semicircular dome into nine tapering sections with conically shaped vaults between stone ribs. To build the vaults, each section would require its own center, which Lenthall thought was too expensive and time-consuming. He devised a simpler, cheaper plan by which a smooth half dome could be constructed without ribs and support the Senate floor above by means of annular vaults built upon its haunches. While Latrobe did not care for Lenthall's simplified structure, he approved it in deference to his clerk's experience. Lenthall had, after all, devised the centerings upon which all the vaults, arches, and domes in the south wing were built, and he knew as much about this type of construction as anyone.

By the end of July, the carpenters completed the centers in the Supreme Court. Once masons finished laying bricks on the framework and the mortar dried, Lenthall began removing the centering but detected an unaccountable warp in the new arch built against the old east wall. He immediately raised the centering and allowed the masonry to set for another two months. On Friday, September 16, the framework was safely removed from under the east arch and, despite some suspicious vandalism, he began dismantling the large frame under the half dome on Monday. Soon after the centering was lowered, workmen heard a loud noise—a frightening cracking sound—that sent them scrambling out windows and doors just before the whole ceiling fell, bringing down tons of brick and mortar. Lenthall was the only one who did not make it to safety.[116]

News of the fatal accident spread through Washington like wildfire. Even before Lenthall's body was recovered rumors were being spread by

Latrobe's enemies, and the editor of the *Monitor*, a friend of the administration, wanted to publish a true account of the accident.[117] Latrobe wrote the newspaper a few hours after the ceiling fell, saying that men were at that moment clearing debris hoping to find Lenthall alive—the chance of which was faint. By the time the piece was published the coroner had determined that Lenthall's death was an accident.[118]

Despite the tremendous force of the disaster, the vaults over the Senate chamber were not injured. The half dome stood firm, presenting an extraordinary sight when viewed from below. Latrobe began rebuilding the courtroom as soon as the rubbish was cleared. Funds were low but a number of private citizens were willing to cover the unforseen expense and all the workmen offered to donate a week's labor to "render the Mischief invisible by the meeting of congress." Instead of a single arch along the east wall, Latrobe built three arches carried on stout stone columns and pilasters. The dome was designed with ribs as he originally intended. All the material was on hand, and Latrobe felt the work could be finished in a month.[119] Like so many of his past predictions, this one also proved overly optimistic.

On December 1, 1808, President Jefferson transmitted Latrobe's sixth annual report, the last of his administration, to Congress. Most of the report dealt with the north wing, its reconstruction, and Lenthall's accidental death. Latrobe blamed the disaster on the two annular vaults carried on the back of the shallow dome that were intended to support the floor above. These structures literally broke the back of the Court's ceiling. In allowing Lenthall to proceed, Latrobe claimed, his better judgment yielded to arguments of economy. At the close of the 1808 building season, much progress had been made on rebuilding the Supreme Court vaults, but they were not finished until the spring of 1809.[120]

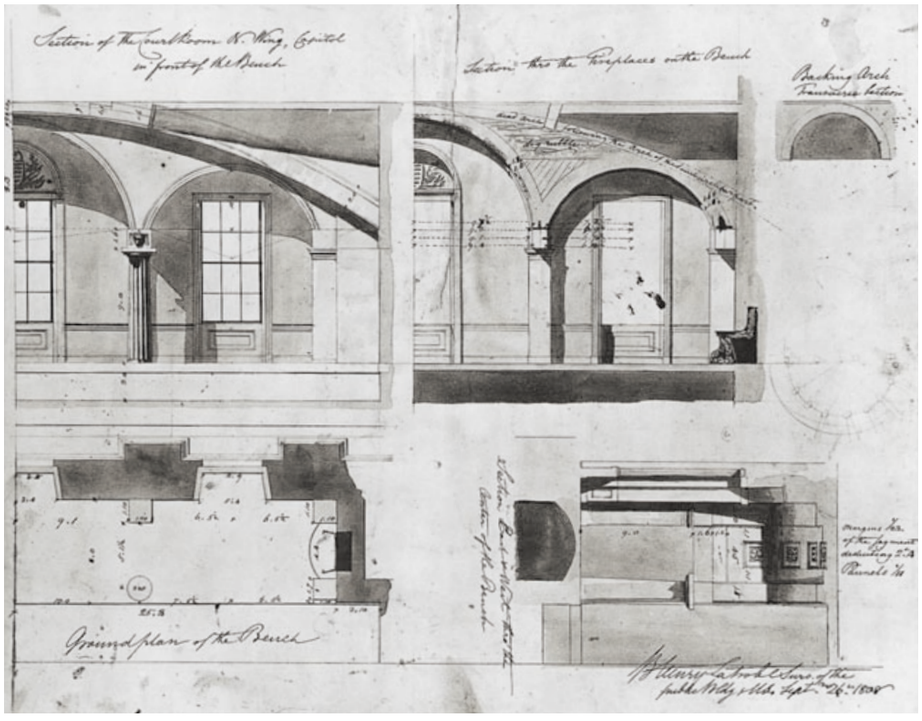
To continue work on the north wing, Latrobe asked for an appropriation of $20,000. He also wanted $25,000 to reconstruct the west side of the wing containing the Library of Congress as well as various committee rooms, offices, and storage rooms. This side of the wing was riddled with rot and the library was too small for the books already on hand, which were piling up in heaps.[121]

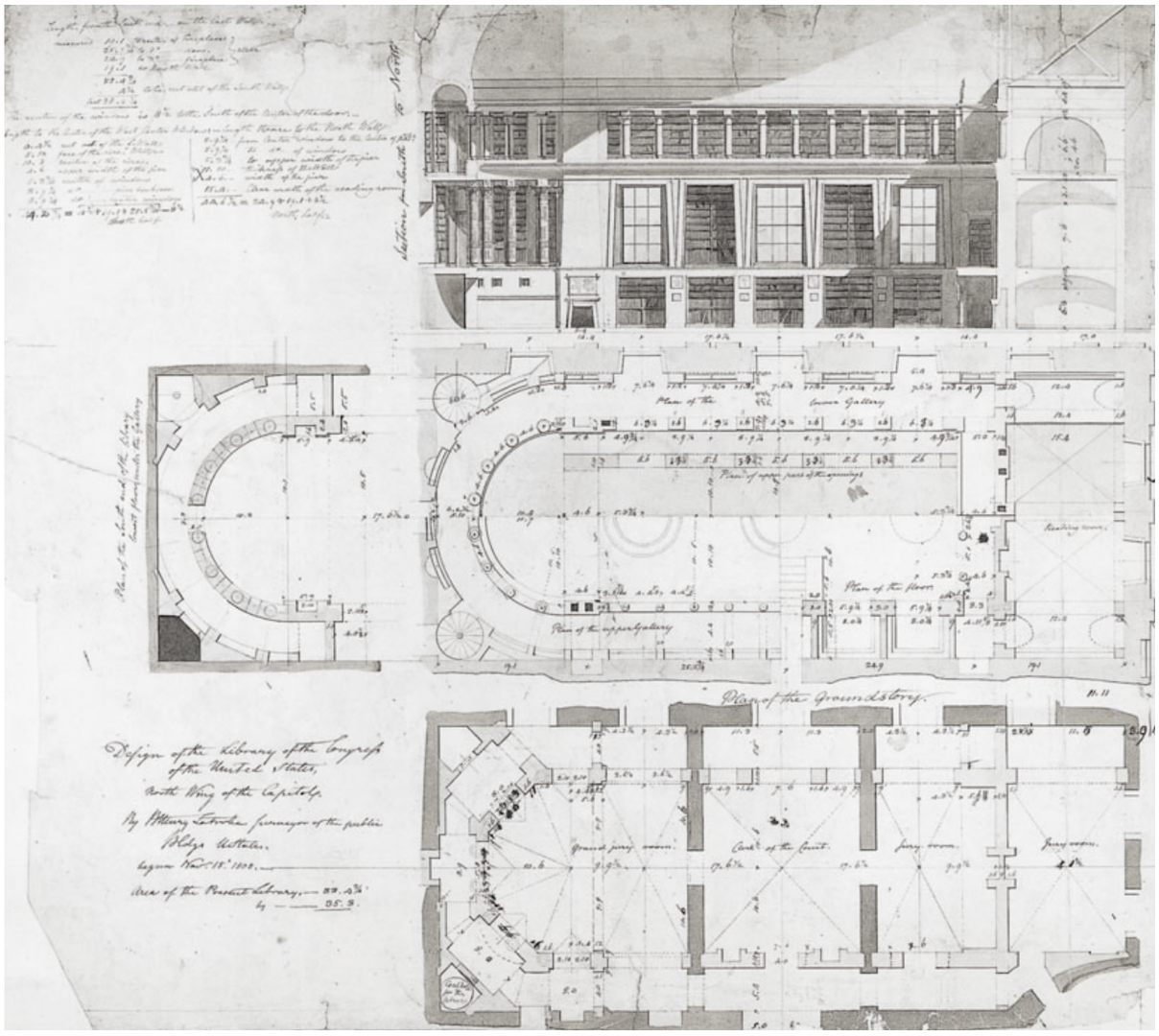
Details of the Supreme Court Chamber

by B. Henry Latrobe, 1808

Library of Congress

On September 26, 1808, one week after John Lenthall was killed by the collapse of the vault over the Supreme Court chamber, Latrobe finished this drawing showing how the vault would be rebuilt. Instead of a single arch along the east wall, the architect designed a three-bay arcade carried on columns and piers as shown in the upper half of this drawing.





Design of the Library of Congress of the United States

by B. Henry Latrobe
1808

Library of Congress

A plan at the bottom of the sheet illustrates structural modifications to first-floor rooms that were necessary to accommodate Latrobe's new library room shown in the upper plan. The most captivating part of the drawing, however, is the section of the library shown at the top of the sheet. In this drawing, exotic papyrus columns, splayed openings, and cavetto cornices give the design its Egyptian flavor. Latrobe indicated sunlight from a large north-facing window spilling from right to left across the room. To make the drawing more appealing, there are books on the shelves, a map above the fireplace, and framed pictures between the alcoves.

Latrobe described the facilities provided in his design for the Library of Congress. It would hold 40,000 books arranged in three tiers against the walls while two rooms were available for unbound books, pamphlets, and printed copies of the laws. A private reading room was provided for members of Congress. Not said was how magnificently the library would be lighted through an arched window facing north, which would not be seen from the outside. Nor did Latrobe mention that his design would employ columns with papyrus capitals, battered alcove openings, and other references to the architecture of the ancient Egyptian world, which nurtured the arts of paper making and writing. Most members of Congress would have found the library exotic and unfamiliar. It was the earliest American design in what would afterwards be called the "Egyptian revival," one of the favorite styles for nineteenth-century cemeteries, prisons, and libraries. Latrobe's library design, however, never got off the drawing board.

On December 12, 1808, Senator James Lloyd, a Federalist from Massachusetts, introduced a resolution inquiring into the amount of money expended on the public buildings in Washington and asking how much more would be needed to finish them. The following day, Stephen Bradley of Vermont offered an amendment confining the inquiry to the President's House and Capitol. The amended resolution passed and Bradley and Lloyd

joined Samuel Smith of Maryland as members of a committee appointed to conduct the inquiry. Thomas Munroe reported that the north wing had cost $371,388, while $323,388 had been spent on the south wing. These figures supported Latrobe's repeated contention that his professional skill was responsible for delivering a better building for less money. But the committee was more interested in learning about future funding requests. Latrobe presented these figures in the form of a chart, which is reproduced below.[122]

	1809	1810	1811	1812	1813	Total
Finish South Wing	$6,000	$4,000	$4,000	$5,000	$1,000	$20,000
Paving and Steps		$5,000		$3,000		$8,000
Finish South Recess	$18,000	$6,000				$24,000
E. Side, North Wing	$20,000	$1,500				$21,500
W. Side, North Wing	$25,000	$15,000				$40,000
Finish North Recess		$30,000	$18,500			$48,500
Center Building			$100,000	$100,000	$25,000	$225,000
Landscaping		$5,000	$5,000	$5,000	$10,000	$25,000
Total	**$69,000**	**$66,500**	**$127,500**	**$113,000**	**$36,000**	**$412,000**

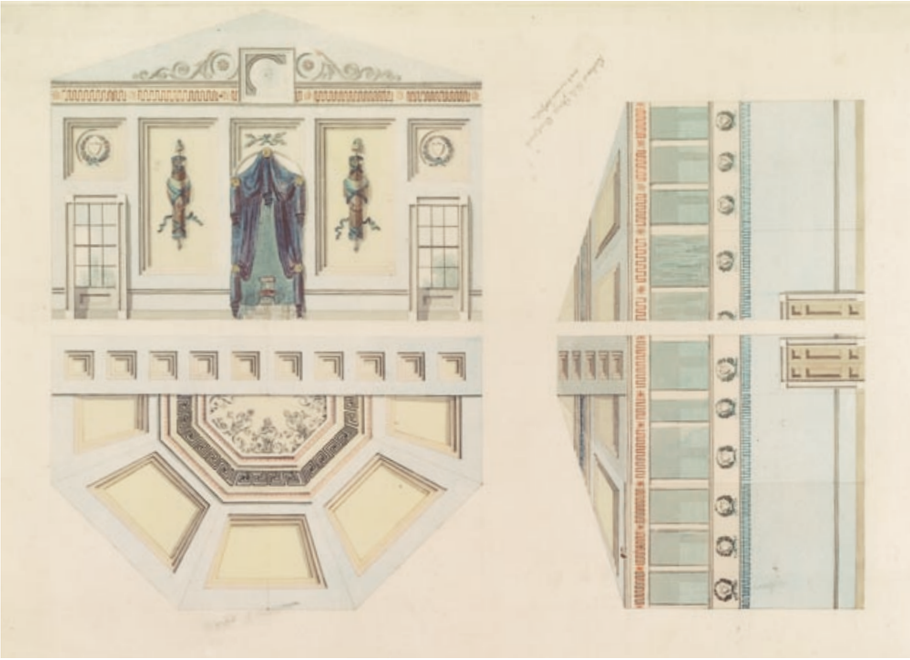
Legislators found the figures frightening. The country was in the throes of economic depression brought on by an embargo that closed American ports to foreign commerce. Customs receipts dropped 55 percent: the loss to the federal treasury has been estimated at $9.3 million.[123] New England was the hardest hit region and her citizens stirred up loud protests against the administration's policies. By the opening of Congress on November 7, 1808, Jefferson had received more than 200 petitions protesting the embargo; 90 percent were from Massachusetts.[124] The administration's policies, meant to punish England and France, were barely felt by those nations while maritime interests at home suffered badly. While hindsight would show its nurturing effects on manufacturing and industry, the embargo was despised as an economic and political failure.

The state of the nation's finances was not encouraging. On January 5, 1809, when Senator Andrew Gregg of Pennsylvania reported on a funding bill to complete the wings, the part aimed at rebuilding the west side of the north wing was immediately struck out by a vote of twenty to ten. Twenty thousand dollars was granted for finishing the Senate chamber and Supreme Court, and an additional $6,000 was given for carving column capitals in the hall of the House. Thus, the Senate withheld about two-thirds of the funds Latrobe requested. The amended appropriation was returned to the House, which deferred action until it passed legislation to strengthen enforcement of the embargo.

The 10th Congress adjourned on March 4, 1809, but the press of business made it clear that the next Congress could not wait until fall to meet. The opening of the 11th Congress was pushed up to the fourth Monday in May. Anticipating a long session that might extend well into the summer, the Senate asked Latrobe to investigate relocation into a more airy chamber. When the request was made, the Senate was sitting in a small committee room on the first floor of the north wing (modern day S–146 and 146A). While the room was a comfortable accommodation during winter, the prospect of using it in summer was unpleasant. Latrobe responded with the idea of building a pavilion in the library space constructed with light frame walls and boards covered with painted or papered canvas. Although dilapidated, the library was high and airy enough to accommodate such a pavilion, and the room only needed to be cleared of the chairs and benches left over from the last term of the Supreme Court.[125] Ornamental painter George Bridport designed and installed the temporary chamber, receiving $950 for his efforts.[126]

RETURN TO MONTICELLO

For the 1809 building season Latrobe was granted funds to continue work in the north wing, to pay for the Senate's temporary pavilion, and to continue carving column capitals in the House chamber. Jefferson signed the appropriation on the last day of his presidency, March 3, 1809. The following day James Madison was inaugurated in the House chamber. Although Jefferson remained in the President's House another week, he "vacated it without regret, and with unfeigned joy took the road back to Monticello."[127] Latrobe's correspondence with Jefferson



Temporary Senate Chamber

by George Bridport, 1809

Library of Congress

For what promised to be a long, hot summer session, Philadelphia architect and decorative painter George Bridport designed a temporary chamber located in the middle of the Library of Congress. For four months, the Senate met in the elegant pavilion, pitched like a tent in the center of the library room.

did not end with the president's retirement, but the two men never saw each other again. While Jefferson maintained his interest in the public buildings in Washington, he never returned to see them. His retirement ended the extraordinary patronage of a president whose involvement in public architecture remains unequaled in the country's history. Latrobe's dealings with subsequent chief magistrates would be stilted compared to the cordial, almost fraternal relationship he had with Thomas Jefferson. And while they often disagreed on such things as skylights and lanterns, their six-year collaboration ended in mutual admiration. In a memorable tribute to Latrobe, the retired president wrote:

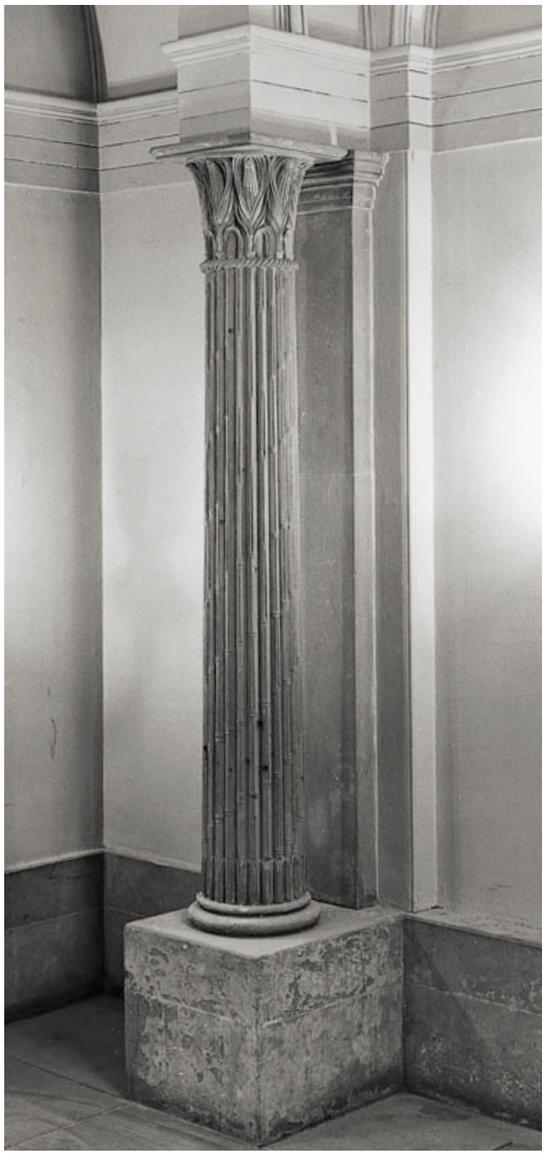
> I shall live in the hope that the day will come when an opportunity will be given you of finishing the middle building in a style worthy of the two wings, and worthy of the first temple dedicated to the sovereignty of the people, embellishing with Athenian taste the course of a nation looking far beyond the range of Athenian destinies.[128]

On June 12, 1809, Latrobe assured Vice President George Clinton that there was no doubt that the Senate would sit in its new chamber at the opening of the next session of Congress. But he needed an additional $5,000 to cover the expense of re-vaulting the Supreme Court and raising the wooden passage connecting the north and south wings. Now two stories high, the gangway allowed passage between the wings on the principal floor where both the House and Senate chambers were now located. Ten thousand dollars would also be needed to buy furniture, carpet, and new draperies for the Senate. The old desks were not suited to the new chamber and Latrobe wanted to replace them with new ones that were double, one desk for two senators.[129] With unusual ease, an appropriation for $15,000 was passed on June 28, 1809, the last day of the session. Sixteen hundred dollars was added to cover the higher-than-expected expense of fitting up the temporary Senate chamber and providing it with furniture.[130]

Corn Column

Perhaps Latrobe's most popular achievement during his years at the Capitol was his design for corn columns. Carved by Giuseppe Franzoni from Aquia Creek sandstone, they were installed in the east vestibule of the north wing during the spring of 1809. The fluting of a conventional shaft was recalled by bundled corn stalks. On the capital, husks were folded back to reveal the cob and kernels of corn. (1971 photograph.)

Detail



One likely reason for Latrobe's success in obtaining additional appropriations was the popularity of his "corn cob" columns, which had just been put up in the east lobby of the north wing. To carry the weight of the vaulted ceiling, Latrobe positioned sandstone columns a few inches from the old walls and designed them with capitals carved with American ears of corn. Bundled corn stalks recalled the fluting of a conventional column shaft and the necking was portrayed as rope. The corn order was an instant success. It was universally admired because it was undeniably appropriate and there was nothing esoteric about it. It was beautiful as well. On August 28, 1809, Latrobe sent the model of the corn capital to Jefferson and told him that it generated more praise than other, more splendid works at the Capitol. Congressmen nicknamed it the "Corn Cob Capital" for the sake of alliteration, he supposed, but he did not think the name very appropriate.[131]

Using the corn order in rebuilding of the east lobby scored a public relations coup. Latrobe turned a structural necessity into a popular attraction that continues to delight visitors to this day. Interestingly, the lobby is rarely—if ever—compared with its counterpart in the south wing, which has no columns at all. There Latrobe was able to build the vestibule with walls strong enough to support the weight of its vault without columns. Its geometry is strong and simple, and ornamentation is restricted to a few plaster moldings. There are

no eye-catching features, yet the spacial experience is eminently satisfying.

By the end of June 1809, the second vault over the Supreme Court was finished. Plasterers completed their work two months later. Although the ceiling in the Senate chamber was first reported uninjured by the collapse of the Supreme Court vaults, workmen were apprehensive about its security. To allay their fears, Latrobe had about one third of the vault rebuilt and reinforced the supporting walls. With some of the boldest hands, his son Henry (who was appointed clerk of the works following Lenthall's death) removed the centering on August 25, 1809, "an exertion of industry and courage which has seldom been equaled by any set of men." Latrobe considered the ceiling a daring feat and told the president that it was one of the most extraordinary vaults ever attempted.[132]

The Court was about to take possession of the first room designed for its use. Since moving to Washington in 1801, the Court had been accommodated in various ways. It first met in a poorly furnished and inconvenient committee room (modern day S–146 and 146–A). When work began to rebuild the interior of the north wing in 1808, it moved to the library on the second floor. That room was so "inconvenient and cold" that the Court moved in the spring of 1809 to Long's Tavern located just east of the Capitol. When construction began on its own room in the Capitol, there was alarm among real estate investors around Judiciary Square who had supposed the Court would soon be located there. Even Jefferson thought the Court's accommodation in the Capitol was temporary. He thought the Court would eventually move to Judiciary Square and its room in the Capitol would become a court of impeachment.[133] But the Court never moved to Judiciary Square and continued to borrow space in the Capitol until 1935.

The usual scarcity of workmen and difficulty with delivery of materials caused a brief delay in the opening of the new Senate chamber, which was used for the first time on Saturday, February 10, 1810.[134] The semicircular chamber was essentially an indoor theater reminiscent of ancient Greece and Rome. Latrobe had used a similar plan for the anatomical theater he designed for the University of Pennsylvania's medical school, which was completed in 1806. That, in turn, was based on Jacques Gondoin's 1769 anatomy theater at the *Ecole des Chirurgie* (School of Surgery), the first *á la antique* room in Paris. Latrobe thought Gondoin's theater was "one of the most beautiful rooms and perhaps the best lecture room in the world for speaking, hearing, and seeing."[135] From a report by leading French architects, Latrobe learned that they considered the shape and form of a domed semicircle "the best adapted for the purposes of deliberation."[136] In 1803 he had proposed such a room for the House of Representatives and was overruled by the president. But Jefferson approved a domed semicircle for the Senate because it was not too different from the original plan, and it may also have reminded him of a famous landmark in his beloved Paris.

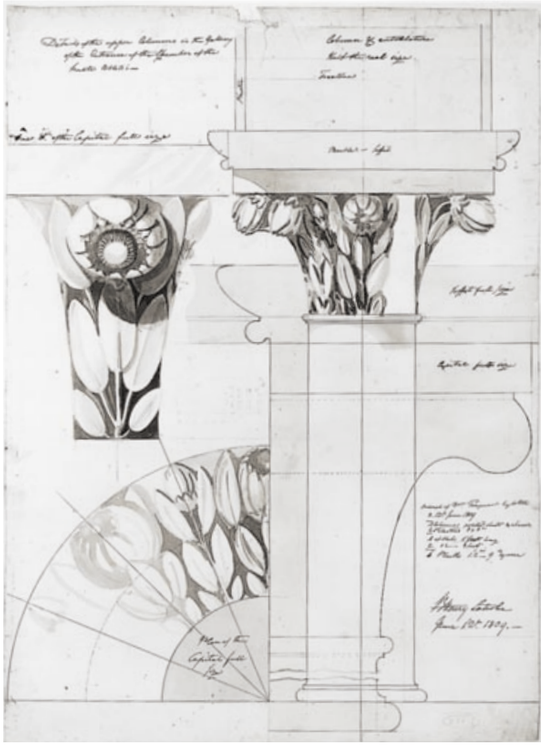
In his annual report for 1809, Latrobe again asked for funds to reconstruct the western half of the north wing; again he was denied. What was already under way could be finished, but the country was in no condition to pour money into new construction when the federal treasury was under such a severe strain. On January 11, 1810, a committee of the House reported that "it is not deemed prudent at *this* time, when a resort to loans may be necessary for the support of the Government, that any improvements whatever should be made, which can be, with any sort of propriety, dispensed with."[137] Clouds of war gathered as efforts to force England and France to respect America's neutrality failed. First the embargo closed American harbors to all foreign commerce. Then, at the beginning of the Madison administration, the Non-Intercourse Act opened ports to all nations except England and France. In May 1810, the Macon Bill No. 2 reopened trade with these two nations but threatened non-intercourse with one if the other agreed to respect neutrality. This last measure practically guaranteed war with one of Europe's great powers. None of these efforts would prevent war, and the economic hardships they brought prevented Latrobe from proceeding much further with his plans for the Capitol.

For the 1810 building season, Latrobe requested $77,500 but was granted $27,500. Work was limited to the columns in the House chamber and finishing work on the eastern half of the north wing. The appropriation passed and was signed in the last hours of the session, so late that Latrobe had begun to fear that nothing would be given at all. With so little money Latrobe dismissed all but

Details of the upper Columns in the Gallery of the Entrance of the Chamber of the Senate U. States

by B. Henry Latrobe 1809

Library of Congress



Special guests of the Senate were accommodated in a small gallery over the western vestibule that offered an intimate view of the proceedings below. The gallery was screened by small marble columns with magnolias incorporated into the capitals. Formerly thought to be cotton, the magnolia design was Latrobe's second American order. The magnolia columns did not survive the fire of 1814.

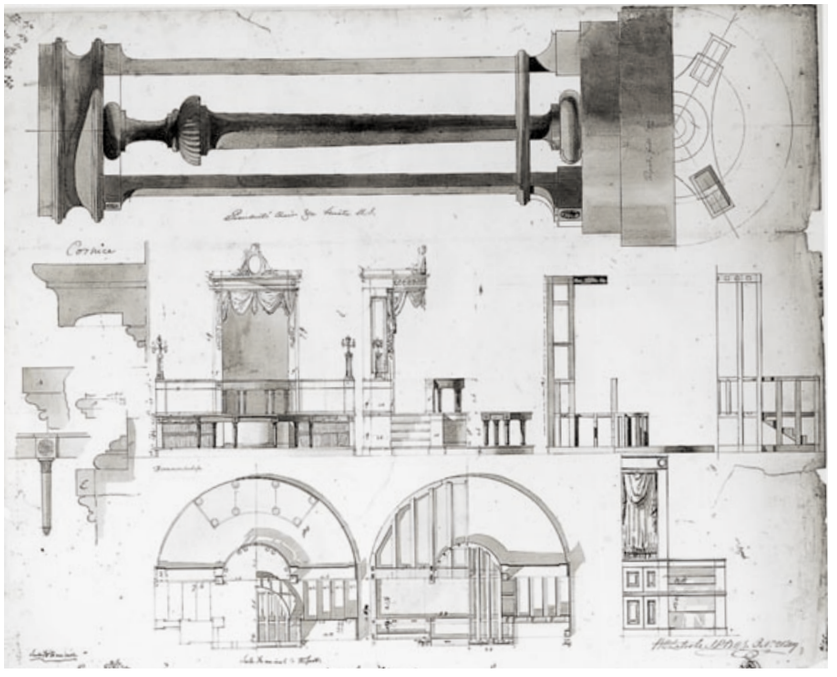
six or seven workmen and supplemented the building fund by selling surplus sheet iron, old desks, and other worn-out furniture. Aggravating the money problems, Latrobe discovered that furniture for the Supreme Court could not be charged to the Court's contingency fund, but was taken instead from his building accounts.[138]

The Italian sculptors were kept busy despite the scarcity of money. Andrei continued carving capitals in the House chamber and Franzoni worked on a figure of Justice for the Supreme Court and caryatids for the Senate. With two orders of columns and six caryatids Latrobe's sculptural program for the Senate was especially varied and ambitious. Positioned along the east wall under the visitor's gallery, the caryatids were carved figures that personified national prosperity and accomplishment—Arts, Commerce, Agriculture, Science, Military Force, and Civil Government.[139] Unlike the ancient caryatids of the Erechtheion in Athens, Latrobe's figures did not support the structure above but stood in front of sandstone piers that did. For the western entrance to the chamber, Latrobe designed a screen of four Ionic columns with monolithic shafts. They were ordered from James Traquair's marble yard in Philadelphia and were probably delivered carved and ready to install. The columns

President's Chair &c. Senate U. S.

by B. Henry Latrobe, 1809

Library of Congress



This sheet of details includes front and side views of the canopied rostrum, as well as its framing plans. What seems to most interest Latrobe, however, is the design for the tripods (top) intended to hold Argand lamps flanking the vice president's chair.

View of the Capitol from the Northeast

by B. Henry Latrobe, 1810

Maryland Historical Society, Baltimore, Maryland

Latrobe's elegant drawing illustrates his vision for the Capitol's completion. A variation of the center portico, flanking colonnades, and grand stair would eventually be built. The dome, however, would ultimately be built from a different design.

supported a small gallery intended for special guests that was screened by four dwarf columns. For these diminutive columns Latrobe designed his second American order, drawing upon the magnolia flower for the capital. Andrei carved them, undoubtedly welcoming the change from the Corinthian order that he had been working on for three years in the south wing.

For the want of money, very little was accomplished in 1810. In his annual report Latrobe alluded to some unidentified improvements made in the Senate chamber, but the plastering on the east wall was not up and the draperies still had not been installed. Because the sculptors were mainly occupied in the south wing, their work in the Senate remained incomplete.[140]

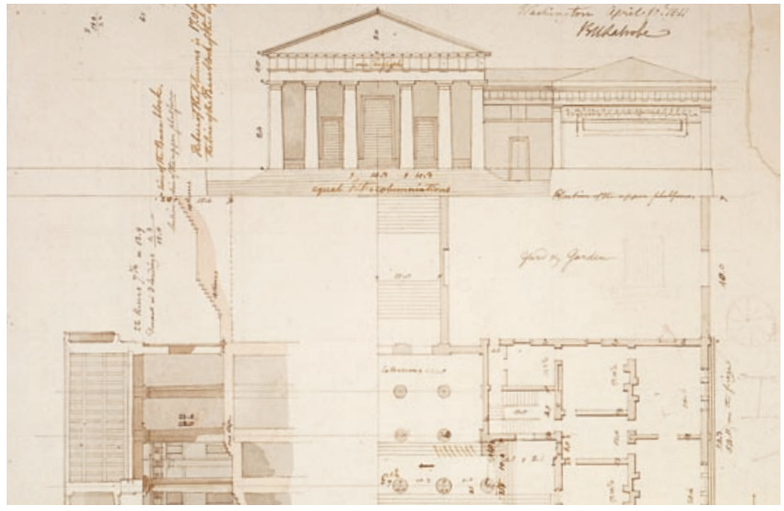
Despite the economic conditions of the country, Latrobe bravely asked Congress for more money. The west side of the north wing was so

Made during the last days of his first Capitol campaign, Latrobe's studies for the west (garden) front included a design to fill the 170–foot gap that then existed between the north and south wings. He proposed a rectangular building with a central nine-bay colonnade. It did not shelter an entrance like its counterpart on the east (carriage) front, providing instead a grand balcony overlooking the city and the Virginia hills beyond the Potomac. Entrance from the west was through a gate house, flanked by a pair of residences for the doorkeepers of the House and Senate. This entrance structure was inspired by the ancient Propylaea, the entranceway to the Acropolis in Athens. Between the doorkeepers' residences and the Capitol, were private yards where the families could dry laundry and grow vegetables. As seen in both the west and the south elevations, Latrobe intended for masonry terraces to accommodate the Capitol on its sloping site.

A. West Elevation of the Capitol

by B. Henry Latrobe, 1811

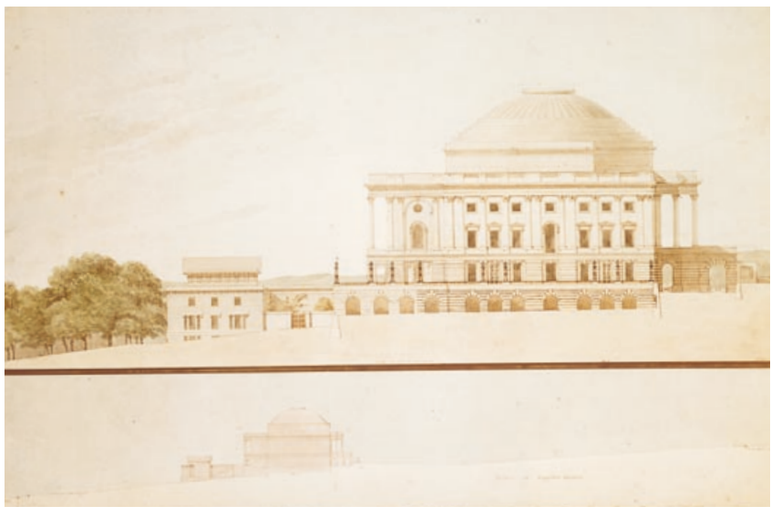
Library of Congress



C. West Approach to the Capitol

by B. Henry Latrobe, 1811

Library of Congress



B. South Elevation of the Capitol

by B. Henry Latrobe, 1811

Library of Congress

D. Model of Latrobe's Capitol Design, 1994

riddled with decay that repair was impossible and funds were sorely needed to begin reconstruction. Money was also needed to finish the recess, which was necessary to prop up the sagging corner of the south wing. Stone platforms would also be built at the north and south ends, and the sculptors needed to keep working. He also asked that the building fund be reimbursed the $2,432 spent to furnish the Supreme Court. Money was needed to buy glass, repair the grounds, and pay salaries and contingencies. In all, Latrobe asked for $47,432 and Congress denied the entire request.

WORK STOPS

On March 3, 1811, the 11th Congress adjourned without making an appropriation for the Capitol. Work stopped, such as it was, bringing an end to the first phase of Latrobe's Capitol career. Near the close of the next session, an appropriation was made to clear up past debts, to complete the sculpture in the Senate chamber, and to pay the return passage of the two Italian sculptors (which they did not take).[141] Latrobe was granted $1,811 for his salary up to July 1, 1811, when his duties as surveyor of the public buildings ceased. The legislation styled Latrobe as the "late surveyor," which he unaccountably took as a "public stigma."[142] The appropriation was approved on July 5, 1812, less than three weeks after the United States declared war on Great Britain.

Latrobe's standing among congressmen and senators was never high. He was accused of extravagance and wasting the public's money, and all the facts and figures supporting his claims of economy could not erase the impression of undue excess. His estimates, whether for construction costs or completion dates, were generally misleading. The commissioners had built a plainly finished wing that suited the simple taste of most legislators. There seemed to be no official dissatisfaction in Congress with the style of the north wing's interior finish, but the grandeur of the south wing was often construed as wasteful, contrary to the American notion of thrift. Legislators generally thought luxury had no place in the seat of a republican government. Criticism based on the perception of extravagance caused Latrobe much uneasiness.

Outside Congress, the Federalist press attacked Latrobe for a wide range of misdeeds, including insubordination, incompetence, waste, and complicity in Lenthall's death. Latrobe tended to attribute these articles to Dr. Thornton, but some were written by other enemies, including James Hoban and John P. Van Ness, a prominent local businessman and civic leader. In October 1808, Hoban, using the pseudonym "A Plain Man," blamed Latrobe for the faulty design of the vault that killed Lenthall. Latrobe's absences from Washington while "arching experiments" were underway were unforgivable, and blaming Lenthall for his own death was a "mean subterfuge." He accused Latrobe of forging ahead with the wholesale reconstruction of the north wing's interiors, while ignoring the president's wish to preserve the columns and arches from the former Senate chamber.[143] This charge was often repeated and troubled Latrobe considerably. The charges appeared again in 1809 in an article by John Van Ness, who signed himself "An Humble Citizen." He accused Latrobe of not following Jefferson's instructions in regard to the north wing and simultaneously demonstrated that the architect's enemies did not lack passion. Van Ness wrote:

> Let it not be said that nothing can escape your covetous grasp. That whenever an appropriation is to be expended, there you are. By turns the architect; the importer, the commission-broker; the upholsterer; the carriage purchaser &c. &c. Now soaring aloft on the cleaving wings of your transcendent genius; then crawling like a reptile through the humble dust: alternately acting the rampant lion, and the fawning spaniel. Unfortunate versatility, if you please![144]

To reassure himself that he had understood Jefferson's wishes, Latrobe wrote the ex-president asking him to recall the instructions regarding plans to rebuild the old Senate chamber. Jefferson replied that inquiries of that nature made "appeals to memory, a faculty never strong with me, and now too sensibly impaired to be relied on." Details may elude him but his general impression was that Latrobe performed his duties with "ability, diligence, and zeal." He was not, however, sufficiently guarded when it came to money. In the matter of the new Supreme Court and Senate chambers, Jefferson was certain that what had been built was from the

plans that he approved. Jefferson continued with friendly remarks on the architect's skill, which must have lifted Latrobe's spirits considerably:

> Besides constant commendations of your taste in Architecture and science in execution, I declared on many and all occasions that I consider you as the only person in the U.S. who could have executed the Representatives chamber or who could execute the Middle building on any of the plans proposed. There have been too many witnesses of these declarations to leave any doubt as to my opinion on this subject.[145]

Without building funds the post of surveyor of the public buildings simply evaporated into thin air. Informally, however, Latrobe continued to provide counsel in matters regarding the Capitol. In 1812 he certified the account of John Rea, an upholsterer hired by the Senate to make curtains for its chamber. Blue and yellow cambric, silk fringe, and tassels were used to make the window treatments.[146] In February 1813 Speaker Henry Clay visited the architect to discuss improvements for the House chamber and was given a full explanation of the events surrounding its design and construction. The Speaker was particularly concerned about the approaching summer session and wanted to know if something could be done with the skylights. Past remedies for too much light and heat included throwing canvas tarpaulins over some skylights or closing others with blinds. During the summer, nearly 90 percent of the skylights were partially blocked and the one operable skylight was totally inadequate for ventilation purposes. Feeling vindicated, Latrobe said the roof framing had been prepared for a lantern, and if it were built, the problems would be solved. There was also the matter of adding forty-four more seats to accommodate the increased membership in the House resulting from the 1810 census.[147]

Clay asked Latrobe to write his ideas in a report, which the architect duly sent to the Speaker on February 4, 1813. All of his suggestions were approved and the House appropriated $5,000 to put them into effect. But President Madison hired someone else to install the new chamber floor and nothing was done about the skylights or lantern because funding would not permit it. Madison told Latrobe that he could not engage him for work because of his low standing with members. Latrobe recalled the conversation in a letter written to his business associate, Robert Fulton:

> He then said at once, that I was so unpopular, and such strong prejudices existed against me, that he could not venture ever to employ me, altho' he believed the prejudices to be unfounded: that nobody doubted my Skill or my integrity, but that I was thought extravagant, a waster of public money, and all the rest of the Trash that has as little foundation, as the stories told of yourself or any other man of talents not generally understood.[148]

THORNTON SILENCED

The first session of the 13th Congress opened on May 24, 1813, with the House sitting under the glare of the noonday sun streaming through the skylights that had given Latrobe so much worry. A month later, in the splendid courtroom in the north wing, another of Latrobe's vexing problems was finally settled. The case of Latrobe v. Thornton was decided in the Circuit Court of the District of Columbia on June 24, 1813, more than five years after it was initiated. To give their lawyers the facts of the case, both the plaintiff and defendant wrote notes with their interpretations of the events that led to the suit. Latrobe's memorandum to Walter Jones and John Law was a brief account of his first meeting with Dr. Thornton in 1798, his opinions on the design of the Capitol, his appointment as surveyor of the public buildings, and the ensuing troubles. Some details were in conflict with the sequence of events, but generally Latrobe's affidavit was direct and dispassionate. He wanted his lawyers to concentrate on one particular aspect of Thornton's libel and "the rest would come in a corroborative of the attempt to destroy that professional reputation on which the support of my family, as well as the peace of my mind, and my acceptance in society depend."[149]

By contrast, Dr. Thornton's twenty-three page note to his lawyer, Francis Scott Key, was rambling and not very helpful.[150] Stories in Thornton's newspaper attacks, such as Latrobe the chimney-piece carver or Latrobe the Moravian missionary, were from men who either had recanted or were

now dead. To defend the missionary story, for instance, Thornton wrote:

> I heard that Mr. Latrobe came out to this country as a missionary or agent to the Moravians, a very worthy and religious Sect; but Mr. Nicholas King being also dead prevents my proving this, and some other points that would have borne very hard on Mr. Latrobe's architectural abilities. But Mr. Latrobe is not excluded from being an architect by his moravian uniform. However I think I have rather *libeled the moravians* by supposing he could be sent on so honorable a mission.

In another passage Thornton made fun of Latrobe's unfortunate luck with vaults and arches that fell. While accidents did occur, Thornton's exaggeration of them was used to question Latrobe's claims as a professional architect:

> It is well known the arches of the Penitentiary House in Richmond fell, the arches at the Treasury office of the U. S. fell twice, & the cost of that work was 13,940 Dolls. & the estimate only $8,000! Can an architect make such blunders? The arch at the Capitol fell, & killed poor Lenthall! If Mr. King had lived the secret of that work would have been known & shown to be Mr. Latrobe's [fault] & not Mr. Lenthall's as Latrobe pretended. The arch at the Secretary of State's office fell and after the failure in the construction of so many arches who can with propriety call him an *arch*—itect?

Page after page of similar explanations and excuses were lightened by puns and double entendres. Thornton sometimes turned to verse:

> Description
> He's about six feet two,
> Of an ash coloured hue.
> His face is of brass—
> His Eyes cas'd with Glass
> not to see
> as do we
> But, because they are green—
> To prevent being seen.
>
> When e'er he walks bye
> He looks in the sky,
> Like one in a wonder,
> As Ducks do in thunder.
> His manners are blunt,
> And his Laugh is a grunt.

A half dozen other poems of similar merit were incorporated in Thornton's defense, and it may have seemed to Key that his client considered a $10,000 libel suit nothing more than a joke. Indeed, Thornton proposed to address the court in verse, following a recital of his "Epitaph" of Moll Turner, the woman supposedly ruined by the plaintiff:

> Judges & Jury of the Court,
> I pray that you'll excuse my sport,
> In giving poor Moll's Epitaph,
> And hope I shall have no denial,
> In substituting in this trial,
> Instead of Fines—a General Laugh!

Year after year, Thornton and Key were able to postpone the trial by claiming that one witness, Ferdinando Fairfax, was unable to attend court. Fairfax was Thornton's witness to the claim that Washington had no confidence in Latrobe. After the delaying tactics could buy no more time, the case was tried in the summer of 1813 and Thornton was found liable. For unexplained reasons Latrobe did not press damages, but the moral victory was priceless. The court awarded Latrobe one cent plus costs. Thornton was silenced at last. But there would be little time to savor victory. In November, Latrobe left Washington to embark upon the next phase of his career, one he hoped would bring the financial security he longed to provide his family. As an agent of Robert Fulton's Ohio Steamboat Company, he would spend sixteen months in Pittsburgh, enduring one of the most disappointing episodes of his life.