

WILLIAM THORNTON, ARCHITECT

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THE first source for any investigation into the career of William Thornton must always be the Thornton Papers, given to the Library of Congress by J. Henley Smith, the grandson of Mrs. Samuel Harrison Smith, executor of Mrs. Thornton's estate, to whom the latter had given them. In spite of this mass of authentic material, however, the investigators maintain their long-lived right of disagreement. The birth date at least seems definitely settled, despite variations, if an autobiographical diary can be followed, namely, May 20, 1759; the place of birth is usually given as Tortola, the largest of the Virgin Islands, but perhaps more exactly, it should be given as the small neighboring island of Joost van Dyke. The parental names, according to Mrs. Thornton, were probably, William, in the case of the father, and certainly, Dorcas Downing Zeagus, in the case of the mother. The father was an English Quaker from Lancashire, engaged in planting. Either the father or an uncle was governor of Tortola at the time of Thornton's birth. When the child was two years old, his father died, and at five he was sent to his parental grandmother's home, *Green-Air*, in Lancashire, obtaining his early schooling at that place. At sixteen, a three-year apprenticeship began with Dr. Fell of Ulverstone, followed by three years at the University of Edinburgh devoted to the study of medicine, with graduation in 1784. His parchment is preserved at the Library of Congress. Hospital experience had been obtained at St. Bartholomew's Hospital in London, where he resided with his stepfather, Hon. Thomas Thomasson. After a brief trip to Tortola he continued his studies in Paris. He also was active socially, frequenting the salon, among others, of the Countess of Beauharnais. As early as 1782, he had been elected a correspondent of the Society of the Antiquaries of Scotland, and during the period under discussion traveled in Europe with Count Andriani, the naturalist. Again there was a trip to Tortola, followed by depar-

ture for America the latter part of 1786. After stopping in New York and Philadelphia, he was naturalized in Delaware as an American citizen, January 7, 1788, and left for Tortola again in April of the same year.

Most of the time prior to his marriage in 1790, however, was spent in Philadelphia, where we shall see his activities were growing numerous. Benjamin Franklin, we may note in passing, invited the young doctor to dinner, as proved by an item preserved among the Thornton Papers. On October 13, 1790, he married Anna Maria Brodeau of Philadelphia, a girl of fifteen, the daughter of the headmistress of a finishing school for young ladies, and left on the 16th for Tortola with his bride. Over two years later he returned to the states on November 16, 1792, and settled in Philadelphia. Appointed a Commissioner of the District of Columbia by President Washington, September 2, 1794, he moved to Washington, where he resided the rest of his life, taking charge of the issuance of patents upon his appointment by President Jefferson in May 1802. He died in Washington, March 28, 1828. He had no children and was long survived by his widow.

So much for the outline of his career. His personality was an interesting one, arousing great affection and bitter hostility. The most frequently quoted characterization is by William Dunlap in 1834: "He was a scholar and a gentleman—full of talent and eccentricity—a Quaker by profession, a painter, a poet, and a horse-racer—well acquainted with the mechanic arts—at the head of the patent office, and was one of the original projectors (with John Fitch) of steamboats and the author of an excellent treatise on language, called "Cadmus." He was a man of infinite humor—humane and generous, yet fond of field sports—his company was a complete antidote to dullness."

The perusal of his letters, to be found not only among the Thornton Papers, but in the libraries of Philadelphia and New York, helps to supplement Dunlap. At the Historical Society of Pennsylvania, for example, a letter to a Michael Withers from the Superintendent of the Patent Office returns one dollar and urges reflection on the thought that an imposition is equal to robbery; and, more intelligibly, a letter to the Directors of the Bank of Columbia from Thornton as a Commissioner of the Dis-

trict, quoted here only in part from a closely written three-page epistle, reveals still more of the character of the writer :

City of Washington 11th Dec.^r 1810.

Gentlemen :

When a Day of payment arrives, consider how afflictive it must be, if disappointed by the comforts of a receipt Day, especially when a large and helpful Family wants food. - When I last addressed you, I did it in great confidence, for an evil genius must have arisen from the late Tempests, and the bawl of discord must have affected you if liberality has left her old abode in your lofty Temple of Dives. . . .

I know there is a general call on the Banks at present, throughout the Union; but that is a dextrous, or rather sinister manoeuvre of the Bank of the U. S. to obtain another Charter; and you are no doubt "*up to it.*" Under a full conviction that I shall experience a continuance of that liberality which I have always found in your Institution,

I am,

Gentlemen,

Very respectfully y.^{rs} etc.

President and Directors

(Signed) William Thornton

of the Bank of Columbia

Again there is in the Ridgeway Library in Philadelphia a letter to the same patient directors, asking for leniency in regard to a loan, endeavoring once more with facetious circumlocution to arouse their sympathy, this time for the suffering of his starving live-stock. Gaillard Hunt sums it up with dispatch: "He was a contentious man, and the habit grew on him as he grew older. He was the writer of long, explanatory, circumstantial letters, all true enough, but doubtless wearisome to receive. He quarreled with his fellow Commissioners of the District, with Fulton over the steamboats, with Latrobe over the Capitol. He importuned Congress on many subjects, the Secretary of State over the Patent Office, the President on Appointments to office and public questions. He became a man with grievances and claims. I have read many of these letters and they seem convincing that he was right. Nevertheless, I can imagine how sorry his correspondents were

to receive them, how reluctantly they read them, and how difficult they found it to answer them, knowing, as they did, that he would be sure to write more long letters in reply." Forever eager, and usually forced to subside, he was often disappointed; over failure to gain a diplomatic post in South America, for example. Yet on occasion he could be brave, if one can follow his own *ex post facto* memory, as in the British attack on Washington in 1814. Legend tells how he stopped the hostile troops from firing the Patent Office by appealing to them to save the depository of American ingenuity with its world-wide interests. "Are you Englishmen or only Goths and Vandals?" he is said to have begun. He was also highly sensitive, Mrs. Madison, the President's wife, having to reassure him often that no slight had been intended. A self-appointed host to all the visitors of distinction to the new Federal City, he no doubt earned the tribute of Mrs. Merry, the wife of the British Minister: "Mr. Thornton was indefatigable in his endeavors to procure us every comfort. He is a quiet, sensible, well-informed man, without brilliancy, or elocution. Well-educated and full of information, which he details slowly from a natural impediment in his speech." His portraits show a face marked by intelligent eyes, and a generally handsome aspect.

The most unfortunate controversy of Thornton's career, no doubt, was the bitter one with the architect, Benjamin H. Latrobe, no less unfortunate because the point of view of each is capable of justification. The envelope among the Thornton Papers which contains some of the heated comments by Thornton during the height of the dispute (and accepted by the Library on condition that it should not be opened until 1925) indicates clearly how exasperating such an antagonist must have been. A single example must suffice. Thornton had stated during one of the skirmishes in the verbal and pamphlet warfare that Latrobe had come to America as a Moravian missionary. When Latrobe heatedly denied the statement, Thornton replied, in the public press, that he was no doubt mistaken, but far from intending to cast any reflection by his statement, he had merely wished to make clear that Latrobe was not to be considered an authority in architecture. A feature of the controversy which, as always in such tempests in teapots, added fuel was the continued friendliness of the "ladies" of the families, causing matters of courtesy and sincerity to be injected. A law-suit for \$10,000 finally brought by

Latrobe to silence his antagonist resulted in the at least moral victory of a one-cent award.

The manifold activities of the versatile Thornton must be reviewed. First, as artist. Early in his career he playfully deceived his uncle when the latter was asked to choose between two engraved bank-notes, one of which was by the nephew. We know he illustrated natural history books, and that at *Tudor Place* in Georgetown a miniature by him of George Washington is preserved. It is in this last field that he was most active, though we read of still-life studies, of the mace he designed for the State of Virginia, and of an elaborate monument of George Washington which he projected. The miniatures would include in addition to Washington, those of Countess Beauharnais, Jefferson, Mrs. Madison, Thornton himself, and his wife.

Next, as inventor. The most notable of his endeavors in this field was his coöperation with John Fitch in steamboat experiments, resulting in his controversy with Robert Fulton, and his subsequent claims that Fulton had fraudulently used his designs. The sources for this matter are Thornton's own pamphlet issued in 1818, Clark's review of the matter, and especially, Gaillard Hunt's letter to the *New York Nation*. Unfortunate for the formation of definite conclusions, is the destruction of Fulton's original patent drawings, when the Patent Office was destroyed by fire in 1836. Many patents were awarded to Thornton. The list is given by Clark and concerns chiefly the application of steam to various devices. We read also of his project for turning sawdust into boards, and of his efforts to reclaim some Potomac flats, now a major part of Potomac Park, the site of the Lincoln Memorial. Fernando Fairfax paid him £2000 for a quarter interest in his patents and manufacturing companies. The New York Public Library contains a Thornton Memorandum in which he calls the attention of the Secretary of the Navy to a few objects, viz: "the preparations of gunpowder, a furnace to heat cannon balls, steam engine to propel ships, carronades, slow-burning cartridge paper; a Deadly poison, known & might be used against an Enemy; wire shirts which will turn bullets, etc., Washington, D. C., 1789."

Aside from his work as architect, toward which we are moving, Thornton was variously versatile. The mere list is imposing. We know that he gave up the practice of medicine before leaving Phila-

delphia for Washington. Prior to this break in his career he had shown interest in phonetic alphabets, with the application of such a scheme to the teaching of the deaf to speak. An essay, entitled, *Cadmus*, and written while in Tortola after his marriage, won the Magellanic gold medal of the American Philosophical Society in 1793, the appendix to which with its discussion of teaching the deaf to speak has been republished at least twice in our own day. He was a member of the American Philosophical Society, a founder of the Columbian Institute of Washington, and throughout his entire life a champion of Negro colonization in Africa. His activities in this last connection have been summarized by Gaillard Hunt; they caused much correspondence with John Coakley Lettson, who secured information from Granville Sharpe of the Sierra Leone experiment, and led to a project for Thornton himself to conduct a group of free Negroes from Rhode Island and Boston to Africa; to correspondence with the President of the French society, *Les Amis des Noirs*, and, after his marriage when active participation in colonization schemes was less practical, to the suggestion (1802) of turning Porto Rico over to free Negroes. In 1816, he wrote to Henry Clay, one of the leaders of the American Colonization Society, and enclosed his pamphlet, *Political Economy*, which favored abolition by ransom.

We have seen that he was a Commissioner of the District of Columbia for five years. The proceedings of the Commissioners take on a more business-like form from the date of his appointment. The building regulations promulgated July 20, 1795, are presumably of Thornton's composition, and as late as 1799 he was in correspondence with General Washington in regard to the public and private rights of the triangular spaces occasioned by the axial arrangements of the streets of the city. Also under the head of activities as Commissioner would come his dreams, rather than plans, for a national university, in which Washington was also much interested. A pamphlet, *Public Education* (1796), outlined his ideas. For the last twenty-five years of his life he had charge of the issuance of patents, ruling the office autocratically and at times extra-legally (for example waiving the fees of the impecunious), but without causing any suspicion of maladministration when a deficit was found after his death. His letter to the Secretary of State, January 16, 1818, defining the re-issue of patents is said to be comparable to that of a legal text-

writer. His gifts as a poet to which reference is often made were limited to cleverness, if the sample given by Clark is a fair one. As a citizen he served as a local magistrate; and, despite his Quaker background, as a citizen-soldier; also as an organizer of the Washington Assemblies (1800). As citizen or Commissioner, or both, he organized a race-course, and he helped to promote without financial success a fire insurance venture and a North Carolina gold mine. He planned a market house on Pennsylvania avenue, where Center Market stood until recently. He wrote endless letters to the papers and to innumerable correspondents on all the subjects he was interested in, including somnambulism, breeding of horses, and landscape gardening. As the friend of freedom, he championed South American movements toward independence, preparing a pamphlet on the subject: *Outlines of a Constitution for United North and South Columbia*. In it he projects a second pamphlet on education in a republic, outlining a scheme which he says had won the approval of General Washington. He also states that he is preparing a pamphlet on the Christian religion, freed of stumbling-blocks. The copy of the *Constitution* in the Ridgeway Library was presented by the author to John Howard Payne.

He was a close friend of Washington's, applying as early as 1793 for a position as his secretary; he was given some trees by the General for his farm, *Park Grove*, near Washington (Jefferson helped him improve his breed of sheep), and he was frequently asked to do small errands by Mrs. Washington. He recommended suitable sculptors to Senator Macon of North Carolina when that state wished to erect a Washington monument, and he urged in a letter to Chief Justice Marshall that the Father of His Country be buried under the dome of the Capitol. His city garden, finally, opposite the site of his masterful *Octagon*, raised buckwheat for his table; he was a lover and breeder and racer of horses; and he lost much money in racing and in unwise loans.

We come now to the buildings certainly or probably designed by Thornton, and to his distinguished work as architect. By way of introduction, we can do no better than quote his own account of what his training in architecture consisted of. Bryan quotes an autobiographical item in this connection, and further details are given in a letter from the Thornton Papers quoted by Kimball

and Bennett: "I saw a publication for a plan of a public library in Philadelphia offering a premium for the best.

"When I traveled, I never thought of architecture, but I got some books and worked a few days, then gave a plan in the ancient Ionic order, which carried the day.

"The President and Secretary of State published a premium of a gold medal and a lot for a house in the city of Washington for the best plan and elevation of a capitol of the United States. I lamentated not having studied architecture, and resolved to attempt the grand undertaking and study at the same time. I studied some months and worked almost night and day, but found I was opposed by regular architects from France and various other countries.

"The Capitol is after a design of my own. . . . It will perhaps be deemed presumptuous that I began to study Architecture and to work for Prizes at the same time. . . . A Plan for a Public Library in Philadelphia was proposed, and the Prize for the best Plan, &c., was a Share in the Company. I studied Architecture, set to work, and drew one of the ancient Ionic Order: This Order I admire much.—The Prize was adjudged to me.—What will not Encouragement do? I afterwards had confidence enough to draw a Plan and Elevation for the Capitol of the United States; which, after much deliberation, opposition, and long Examinations was adjudged to me. . . ."

The earliest design of which the record speaks is that for the Philadelphia Library, the competition for which Thornton won in 1789, receiving a share of Library stock (valued at forty dollars) as prize. The building on Fifth Street opposite Independence Square was torn down in 1880. The most notable feature of the design was the triumphal arch motive, four colossal pilasters rising to a pediment, which dominate the center of the façade of a brick building with white stone trimmings. The order is Ionic, Kimball and Bennett calling it Palladian rather than "ancient," as Thornton thought. Perhaps the origin of the design was textual, but good taste was in control of the use being made of the source.

Next we reach *Woodlawn*, Fairfax County, Virginia, bequeathed to Eleanor Parke Lewis and her husband by George Washington, and *Montpelier*, Madison's home in Orange County, Virginia. The basis for attributing *Woodlawn* to him is a diary

entry by Mrs. Thornton, August 4, 1800: "Mrs. Lewis . . . and I went in Mrs. Washington's carriage to see Mr. Lewis's Hill where he is going to build. Dr. T. has given him a plan for his house." The cogency of the *Montpelier* attribution is less obvious. The center of the house was built by the father of James Madison, the portico was added in 1793, and the wings later, at first of a single story. It is called Thornton's design by Brown and Clark; but Kimball, and by way of echo, Frary, think otherwise. It may be that in connection with the addition of the wings (1808-10), Thornton made his sketch and gave hints. *Brentwood*, Florida avenue and Fifth street, N. E. Washington, may be briefly considered. Clark gives it to Thornton. All other authorities to Latrobe, to whom its style certainly awards it.

In the case of the Roman Catholic Cathedral in Baltimore, the names of Latrobe and Thornton are again connected. Kimball believes Thornton's activities in this connection were volunteered—without stated warrant. At any rate, Bishop Carroll was given a sketch by Thornton, no longer extant, which like the designs of the Capitol were thought by Latrobe to be impractical, when he was asked to comment on them by the trustees. Only thus indirectly can Thornton's design be judged. Fifty-four Corinthian columns, thirty feet high, are spoken of, with a "tower or dome" resting on some of them without the support of piers or relieving arches. The significance of the structure was clearly expressed in the design, but the conception was unduly expensive, and, Latrobe thought, impossible of stone construction.

Again, in the case of the University of Virginia, the same two architects are met, both being consulted by Jefferson in regard to the architectural scheme to be followed. The letters which passed between Jefferson and Thornton on the subject are given by Glenn Brown from the Thornton Papers. In Jefferson's letter, dated Monticello May 9, 1817, he outlines the scheme as he had formulated it, provides a rough sketch, and calls for suggestions. Thornton replied with two sketches and loquacity. Some of his suggestions were valuable. With Latrobe's suggestions slow in arriving, Jefferson started building (Pavilion VII, now Colonnade Club) on July 8, 1817, using some of Thornton's ideas. The arches below and the Doric columns above are as in Thornton's Doric sketch, though the second story is lower, and a pediment is added. Dormitories were to have columns in front,

as Thornton suggested, Jefferson told Latrobe on August 3, 1817, and colonnade and arcade were to alternate. The roof, however, was to be kept flat, contrary to Thornton's ideas. The Visitors later decided that additional rooms should be added when necessary to the faculty quarters as Thornton had advised. The working drawings Jefferson made for this Pavilion, incorporating some of Thornton's suggestions, are given by Adams.¹ We may note here that the drawings for the University of Virginia preserved at the University are held by Glenn Brown to be by Thornton; but Kimball is certain they are by Jefferson. The sketches sent by Thornton in the letter of May 27, 1817, are given by Kimball and are taken from the University of Virginia Archives, Jefferson Drawings, No. 16.² A Doric prostyle colonnade is noted over an arcade, and the use of a portico over a rectangular basement. Kimball finds only at *Poplar Forest* (1804) a preceding instance of this arrangement; elsewhere the portico is above a semi-circular or segmental base.

The last debatable design of Thornton's is that for *Homewood*, Baltimore. Kimball says in *American Architecture* that *Homewood* is a Thornton house, and Miss LaFollette in *Art in America* follows suit. Recent research, however, has shown quite conclusively that a local carpenter, William Edwards, is to be credited with this early republic gem.³ On the other hand, mention may also be made in this connection of the belief of Dr. James Bordley, Baltimore, himself an amateur antiquarian of distinction, that Thornton will yet be revealed as the architect of *Homewood* when the letters between his collateral ancestress, Miss Gibson, as well as those of Nellie Custis and others are made public. They are now in the keeping of Mr. Roland S. Morris, Philadelphia.

The *Octagon House*, 1741 New York Avenue, N. W., Washington, is Thornton's masterpiece. It is now the home of the American Institute of Architects. The definitive publication regarding it is by Glenn Brown. Little else can, or need, be said. The house was built for John Tayloe between 1798 and 1800, and

¹H. B. Adams, *Thomas Jefferson and the University of Virginia* (Washington, 1888), p. 13.

²*Thomas Jefferson, Architect* (Boston, 1916) Plate 212.

³Z. T. H. Halsey (ed.), *Great Georgian Houses of America* (New York, 1933), p. 18.

served as the President's house for a period during Madison's administration, following the burning of the White House.

Glenn Brown says he had in his possession several of Thornton's designs for private houses. There is abundant proof at least for the house known in 1896 as the Hillman House on North Capitol street between B and C streets, designed and superintended by Thornton for General Washington. Its site is now part of the Capitol Park extension toward Union Station. Brown saw some of the interior woodwork and thought it showed the skill and refinement of the architect. He mentions, but does not locate, an "old sketch" which "gives an idea of the exterior of this building as it appeared in 1793"—an obvious slip, since Washington did not buy the lots until 1798. In a letter to Thornton, dated at Mount Vernon, October 1799, found in the Thornton Papers, Washington says he built the house for the convenience of members of the government, while for himself he planned to choose some other site when such plans would prove feasible. He did not, however, survive the year.

The last of Thornton's own designs is that of *Tudor Place*, 31st and Q streets, Georgetown, built for Thomas Peter, about 1810, and still occupied by lineal descendants. Studies of the plan are among the Thornton Papers, and of the elevation at the *Octagon House*. Brown gives a ground plan, notable for its skillful use of the fashionable oval room.⁴ The omission of these features in the house as built is regrettable, probably for reasons of economy. The plan as built is given in Ware.⁵ The exterior as built is quite similar to the extant elevations by Thornton. Of stuccoed brick, painted yellow, it has white woodwork. It is of two stories with the characteristic wide hall through the center. Galleries connect with the two wings. A circular porch in the Soane tradition marks the south entrance, decorated in the Tuscan manner. The semi-circular headed windows of the first floor are balanced above by triple windows on either side of the semidome of the portico. The whole does not impress the spectator as showing the happy unity of the *Octagon*, or the charming obviousness of *Homewood*.

We come now to the United States Capitol, the critical history

⁴ Glenn Brown, *The Octagon* (American Institute of Architects), p. 64.

⁵ W. R. Ware, *Georgian Period* (New York, 1923), III.

of which can be traced through some sixty years of controversy. The early critics stressed the importance of Hallet and of Latrobe, and tended to minimize the significance of Thornton. Then came Glenn Brown's exhaustive *History of the United States Capitol* in 1900, which strongly rehabilitated the Thornton legend. Recently, Fiske Kimball and Wells Bennett have examined new drawings and letters, rearranged the old drawings, and made clear that Hallet is deserving of a share of the credit for the "Old Capitol," while the prospective issuance of new Latrobe material by Ferdinand C. Latrobe promises once more to revitalize the Latrobe claims. The body of material has now grown so large that present purposes call for little more than a summary of the present state of the problem, based on the current classification of material. It seems that the drawings submitted by Stephen Hallet at the close of the competition were found preferable but not quite satisfactory, and that the Commissioners retained him to prepare a modified scheme. Thornton was then permitted to submit his drawings later, after having seen or at least heard of Hallet's designs and the desired modifications. These post-competitive drawings by Thornton were then premiated, but the monetary award was divided between Hallet and Thornton, the former being engaged to take charge of the construction of the building. Modifications of a practical nature were soon found necessary. When the builder attempted to restore some of his own ideas, a first-class quarrel developed between the professional architect and the amateur-designer, who had won the competition and who had now become a Commissioner. The upshot was Hallet's dismissal. When George Hadfield took charge he called for the drawings, and a "modified" set were produced by Thornton, no doubt profited by the recent controversy. The "original" drawings thereupon disappeared. When Latrobe took charge, fresh controversy broke out. With Jefferson's backing, Latrobe made significant changes, resulting eventually in Latrobe's resignation. At present the east façade of the center wings reveals Thornton's late colonial manner, the legislative halls of the Old Capitol (now Statuary Hall and the Supreme Court) the genius of Latrobe.

In conclusion, we must agree, I think, that Hallet and Thornton share the honors for the original design, and that Latrobe was justified in terms of accuracy, if not of tact, in writing at one time

that Thornton's design was one of the first of modern times, and at another, that with brilliant ideas, he yet lacked the practical skill necessary for the execution and articulation of a plan.

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